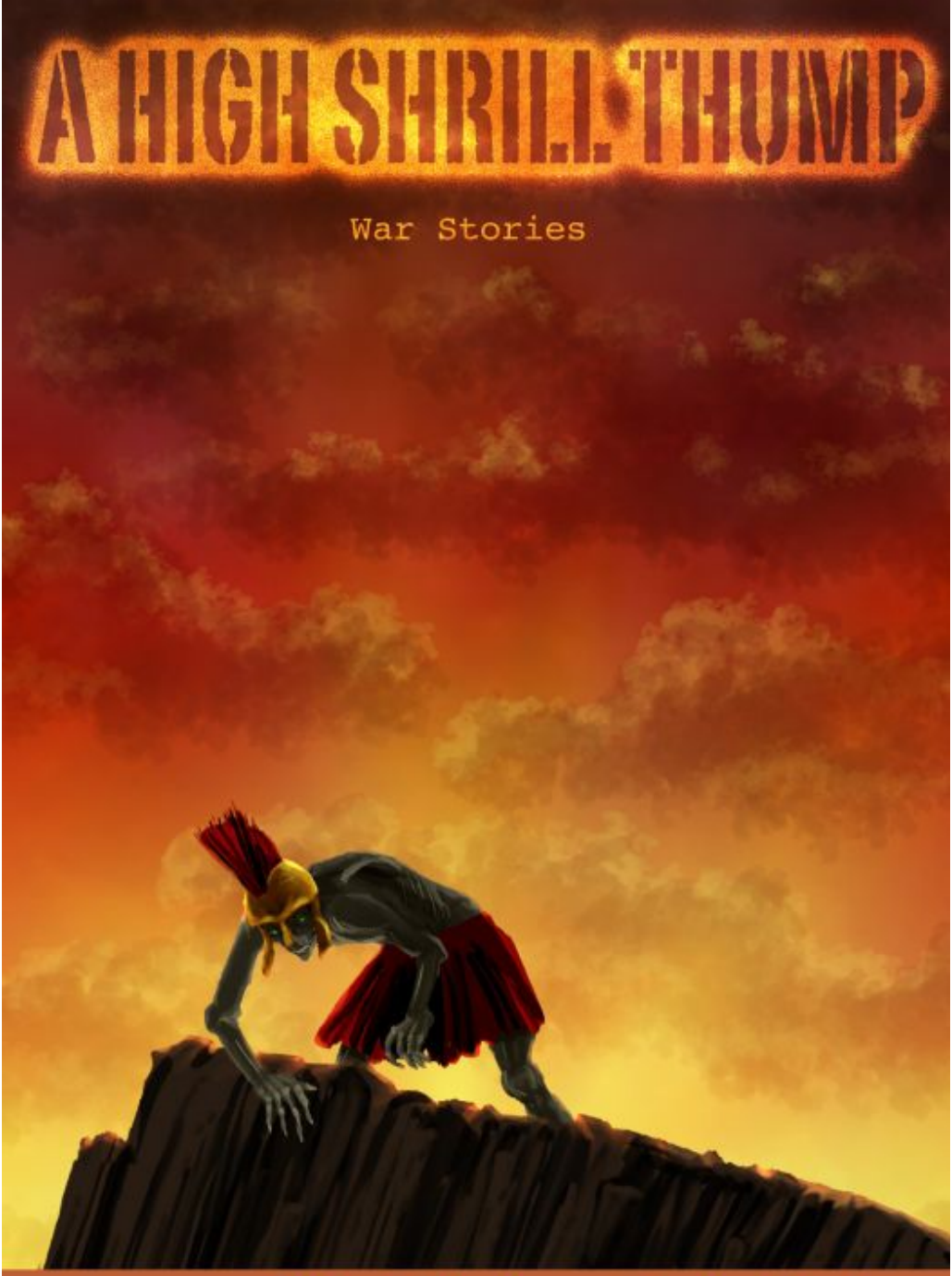
A HIGH SHRILL THUMP

War Stories



THIRD FLATIRON

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A High Shrill Thump: War Stories

Third Flatiron Anthologies
Volume 1, Fall 2012

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The Man Who Couldn't Die

by David L. Felts

Exactly four months and eleven days after receiving his notice, Jonathan Bailey was on his way to kill people he'd never met and knew nothing about.

Two buses, three planes, one helicopter, and twenty-seven hours later, he thumped to the ground on the other side of the world. He had scented sunscreen—four squeeze bottles of Coppertone, tearfully provided by his mother at the Greyhound station—smeared on his exposed arms and face. He reeked of coconut.

He piled off the chopper with the rest, a dozen tired-looking boys identical in their fatigues and fright. The large seabag he carried over one shoulder seemed heavier. Dust swirled, forcing him to squint. He spit to clear the taste from his mouth. He watched the chopper rise, and it was as though he'd swallowed a block of ice. It sat in his gut, leaking ice water into his veins, chilling his bones and making him shiver. The chopper faded to a dot and disappeared over the trees.

An efficient young marine lieutenant quickly directed traffic, porting off the new arrivals to the various squads. Jonathan knew enough not to salute in a war zone.

"Name?"

"Private Jonathan Bailey, Sir. Casper." Casper was the nickname he got stuck with during basic training. He was as pale as a ghost, his complexion courtesy of a very tall English family tree.

The Lieutenant's face gleamed with sweat. He wrote something on his clipboard.

"Lucky you, Private. Damn lucky. You're in the Fourth." He pointed to a large canvas tent off to his right. Casper noticed the slight trembling of his hand. "That's Sergeant Wills out front. You listen to him, hear? This isn't Pendleton. You remember that if you want to go home wearing clothes instead of a flag."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on now, Casper. Good luck."

"Yes, sir." Casper almost saluted, but stopped himself in time. Leaning against the weight of his seabag, he tottered over to the tent. Wills, a barrel-chested man with a ruddy complexion, sat on an oil drum, whittling.

"Uh. . . Sergeant?"

Wills fixed him with an appraising stare.

"I'm supposed to report to you?"

"Asking or telling?"

"Telling, I guess."

"You in the Fourth?"

"That's what the Lieutenant said."

Wills slid off the barrel. He towered over Casper by half a foot. Casper made to back up, but Wills grabbed his shoulders. Casper stared into Wills' black eyes, pinned by the intensity of the man's gaze, feeling. . . something. A smooth slithering in his head, a twisting behind his eyes that made the air shimmer. A warm flush spread through his body, making his skin tingle, chasing away the chill. The moment passed and Wills let him go and stepped away, breaking eye contact. Casper blinked and swayed. It was like waking up.

"Grab a cot," Wills said, jerking his thumb at the tent. He sat on the barrel and resumed whittling.

Casper stumbled inside.

...

His first patrol came three days later; three hard, sweaty days spent filling sandbags and digging latrine pits. He would have been thankful for the break if he weren't so scared.

He stood outside the tent with the others, waiting for Wills, not understanding why everyone was so cheerful. He thought he'd been frightened when he'd stepped off the chopper, but that was nothing. They were going to

hit the jungle. Reassurances about Wills' ability to keep his men safe hadn't gone far. He felt short of breath and twitchy, as though he'd drunk a dozen cups of coffee.

Hound—nickname courtesy of his droopy, basset hound eyes—saw him and homed in. "You doin' all right there, FNG?"

FNG stood for Fucking New Guy. It would remain Casper's position in the totem until someone newer showed.

"Ain't scared, are you?" Hound grinned and winked at some of the others, who grinned back.

Casper didn't want to admit his weakness. He shrugged, adjusting his pack. "I'm not scared."

"That's good," a chunky guy called Donut said. "No reason to be scared."

"Sarge'll take care of you," Keeper said. He was a soccer player from California. He played goalie. "He takes care of us all. Nobody dies under the Sarge's watch. Nobody."

It wasn't the first time Casper had heard that assertion. He hoped it was true. At first he'd chalked it up to chatter, a way to keep the fear at bay, but lately he'd begun to wonder if there wasn't more to it.

Wills strode up. Over the last three days, Casper had learned some facts and formed opinions: Wills was the son of a West Virginia coal miner; his mother was a full-blooded Cherokee. He was a quiet man who kept his black hair shaved to a stubble and didn't like to be called *sir*. He could drink vast quantities of warm Budweiser and never slur a word. He was fiercely devoted to his men. All the officers, even the puffed up self-important ones who thought their shit smelled of roses, treated him with respect.

"Take off the pack," Wills said.

Casper did. Wills rooted through it, separating things into two piles. When he was done, he pointed to the bigger pile and said, "Put that stuff back on your bunk."

The pile contained his mess kit, bedroll, a Bible, his field manual, a roll of toilet paper and other toiletries, the small folding shovel, and most of his extra clothes. The smaller one didn't have much more than a few pairs of socks and underwear and six cans of rations.

"Think you'll need that junk in the bush?" Wills slapped Casper's back to take the sting out of his words. "Go on, son, you'll be better off traveling light."

When Casper emerged from the tent, Wills had stuffed the smaller pile back into Casper's pack.

"You wearing your vest?" Wills asked.

Casper nodded.

"It's damn hot. Slows you down, too."

"And you won't need it," Keeper said.

"I'd rather wear it," Casper said.

Wills shrugged. "Make sure you drink plenty of water. Got your iodine tablets?" At Casper's nod, he said, "Okay, let's go."

They humped out, headed north. Hound walked next to Casper.

"Hey FNG, how'd a pale little runt like you get in the Marines?"

Casper thought a moment. "I slept with your mother."

Ahead of them, Ju-Ju, a tall black man, laughed. Hound stared, looking as though he didn't know whether to be insulted or amused. Amusement won and he grinned. "That answers that. Balls big as cantaloupes."

Casper returned the grin. Hound knuckled his shoulder. "Welcome to the Fourth, Casper."

"Where we going, anyway?"

Hound shrugged. "We go out, hike around for a few days, and shoot bad guys. Then we go back."

Casper hefted his M-16. He'd shot it hundreds of times in training, had even earned the Marksmanship ribbon, but the only thing he'd ever had in its sights was a target. The thought of sighting down on a man made his knees weak. He pushed the worry away and concentrated on keeping up.

...

It was closing in on four o'clock, and Casper was hot. Sticky-nasty-wet-and-hot. The kind of hot that started in his shorts, climbed up over the top of his head and dripped down the front, back to where it started. His vest chafed him through his soaked undershirt. The straps on his pack rubbed his shoulders. He thought about how good a chocolate milkshake would taste, remembered swimming in Hunter Creek—swinging out on the rope with a Tarzan yell and dropping into the cool water. Would he ever be cool again?

The shot sounded like a whip crack, rapidly followed by the stutter of several weapons firing at once. Hound was already on the ground. He grabbed Casper's arm and pulled him down. The air grew thick, and Casper found himself panting, trying to catch his breath. The ice was back, making him shiver, when moments before he'd been sure he was melting.

Hound's words got the world started again. "First rule: don't give them something to shoot at. Sarge don't tolerate sloppiness. Now watch him."

Wills was crouched behind a tree. He held up his left hand, making gestures with his fingers.

"Three of them," Hound said, interpreting. "We got the right. Come on."

He began to slither through the undergrowth. Bullets snapped through the leaves over their heads like angry hornets. Casper followed because he didn't know what else to do.

Hound stopped. He pointed and mouthed, *There's one*.

Casper followed the direction of Hound's finger, barely detecting a muted gray shape among the speckled green. The shape moved: Casper caught a glimpse of black hair and wide-set eyes.

Shoot him, Hound mouthed.

Casper's grip on his weapon tightened until his fingers ached. Shoot him?

Hound elbowed him. *Shoot. Him.*

Casper swallowed, trying to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. Staring into Hound's eyes, he saw that this was his defining moment. Either he was an FNG or he wasn't, either he could be counted on or he couldn't. He raised himself to one knee and sighted. He could feel Hound's gaze on him, expectant. The whole world quieted, waiting. His father had fought in Korea. Casper thought about what he'd said when the draft notice came. *You do what you have to do and you come back to us, understand?*

Casper pulled the trigger.

The man jerked and dropped.

Inside Casper, something broke, and he knew he would never be able to fix it.

...

That evening, after they'd pitched camp and settled in, Wills came over to Casper and crouched down, speaking in a low voice. "Anybody can pull a trigger and say to himself, 'I shot a gook.' For some, that's all it ever is. But for others, it's like being born and dying at the same time. That's what makes them special. If that's the type you are, and I think it is, don't be afraid of that. Don't be afraid to care."

Casper stared into Wills' dark eyes and said, "I won't."

...

He kept a calendar where he marked off the days in red pen. Once a week, he wrote his parents and told them not to worry, that he was fine. Every now and then, he would count and find himself amazed that another twenty days had gotten behind him. New faces appeared, familiar faces vanished. There was always an FNG. The weather went from hot and wet to cold and dry and back again. Time swirled away, lost in a haze of warm beer, cards, and the jungle.

He stopped being afraid, because the rumors were true. No one in the Fourth died, or even got so much as a scratch. It went like this:

Hound stepping through the covering on a pit, dropping in among sharpened *punji* sticks—sharpened pieces of bamboo coated with human shit—and hauling himself out with no more than a few smears of crap on his pants. . .

Ju-Ju stepping on a land mine and walking out of the cloud of smoke smiling. . .

A grenade landing right among them, shrapnel shredding the leaves all around. . .

Bullets buzzing through the air, thick as flies on watermelon, brushing their clothes, their hair. . .

Casper stepping around a tree to find himself facing the black hole of

a rifle barrel, big as a tunnel, pointing right at him from not more than two yards away. The look of surprise on the man's face after he'd squeezed off four rounds and Casper had just stood there a moment before raising his rifle and putting a triple burst into the man's chest.

Pits, grenades, bullets, knives, stakes, mines—nothing could so much as prick the tender flesh of the Fourth.

And the days blurred into one long smear of jungle-green and blood-red.

At night, the faces of the men he had killed haunted him, and sometimes he wished he could stop caring.

...

Mist rose off the leaves in twisted streamers of vapor that clung like fingers as Casper pushed through the bush. The heat wrapped him like a wet towel. With any luck, this would be his last patrol. He'd been in country ten-and-a-half months. Two weeks to go, then home for thirty days stateside leave. He glanced at the corporal's stripes on his sleeves. One more year at a home post to finish his term. Casper felt dazed by how close he was to leaving. He didn't have a year's worth of memories. Maybe a few months at most.

Wills ranged ahead. He always took point. When he reached the edge of the clearing, he held up his hand, signaling everyone to stop. Casper and the rest crouched, while Wills forged into the clearing, thigh-high saw grass tugging at his faded fatigues.

Halfway across, he tripped the claymore. It exploded with a thump that resonated in Casper's chest. A claymore mine was basically a stick of dynamite stuck in a pile of ball bearings. Steel bearings whacked into trees, tore their way through the leaves. Bits of dirt pattered down on Casper's helmet. He heard them whine past his head.

Voodoo, a gangly black man from Alabama, picked up a bearing that had landed by his feet. He chucked it at Casper, and it plinked off his helmet.

"Cut it," Casper said.

Voodoo laughed.

The smoke cleared to show Wills still standing. He waved the rest of the platoon through. They hit the jungle on the other side of the clearing, marched another two miles, then stopped for a fiver.

"What the fuck, Sarge," Tex said, plopping down. He was a gangly Texan with red hair and a drawl. He cracked a ration and scooped out corned beef hash with two fingers. "This a boondoggle or what?" he said around his mouthful.

"Yeah," said Sully, a Mick from Detroit. "Thought we were gonna see some action."

Wills didn’t reply. He looked tired, done in. He tugged at his pack. Casper went over to help him and that's when he saw it.

A dent.

A dent the size of a dime, with a shiny, circular mark right in the center.

"Sarge," Casper said, tasting fear in the back of his throat, "your helmet. . . there's a—"

Wills' warning look made Casper snap his mouth shut. Turning so the rest of the platoon couldn't see, Wills took off his helmet, examined it, then scraped mud from his boot and smeared it over the dent. He set the helmet back on his head as though he were driving a stake.

"East," he said, jabbing a finger into Casper's chest.

"But it ain't my turn to watch, it's—"

"East."

Casper knew better than to argue. As he worked his way to a lookout position some thirty yards from the group, he heard Wills assigning others. Tex and Sully got picked, of course. Still hadn't learned the lesson of keeping quiet. Casper guessed he hadn't either. Invulnerable or not, Wills played the game for real. He ran the Fourth tighter than pages in a book.

Casper found a good spot against a huge root of a banyan tree, closing his eyes. Hearing was more important than sight. The jungle was full of sounds—birds calling, monkeys chattering, insects buzzing. The jungle getting quiet, that was the first sign of trouble.

A voice called out softly, "Casper?"

"Over here."

Wills appeared from behind a stand of bamboo like some sort of jungle spirit. "We need to talk."

Casper was suddenly struck by how old Wills looked. Deep lines furrowed his face, and the flesh surrounding his eyes was loose and dark. Twenty-three going on sixty, that's what he looked like. Casper remembered what his mother used to say about Mrs. Malroney, the ancient woman who'd lived next door. *One foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.*

A flash of insight connected the dots, and Casper suddenly realized what Wills was sacrificing to keep them safe.

"Is it bad?"

Wills' shoulders slumped. "It's like driving a jeep with the gas gauge broke. You don't know you're running low until the engine starts to sputter." He sighed and rubbed his face. "Should've spotted that wire in the clearing. Something like that uses up a lot of juice."

"Call it short and let's go back."

Wills chuckled without humor. "We're fighting a war, boy. This ain't no Boy Scout camp outing. What're we gonna tell the boss? 'Sorry, Cap, old Wills ran outta mojo so we packed it in.' You'll be reading about my court martial in the *Stars and Stripes*."

Casper picked at a torn nail. "Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you still here? You done your year. You done your year and

more." It was a question he'd long wanted to ask.

Wills took off his helmet and ran a hand over his head, flicking the sweat off into the bushes. He stared at his helmet, turning it over and over in his large hands. "I made a promise to someone," he finally said, as he used the banyan root to pull himself upright. He put his helmet back on.

"Take it back, Sarge. Whatever you gave me and the other boys, take it back."

"No," Wills said with a slow shake of his head. "It doesn't work that way," he said before he melted into the green shadows of the jungle.

...

Five turned into a ten and then stretched to over an hour as Wills napped in the shade. Casper had swapped watch with Big Bob. Wills twitched, and Casper started thinking about how he hadn't noticed how much Wills had been sleeping lately.

The rest of the platoon lounged, dozing or lost in thought, keeping silent because that's what you did in the jungle. Casper found himself thinking about some of the men who'd been here when he'd arrived. They were gone, back to the world. He gazed at the new crop; Sully and Tex, Red Foot, Milkman, Bones, Rock, Voodoo. How much did Wills have left?

Wills stirred and opened his eyes, blinking. He glanced at the sky and scowled. Casper took the brunt.

"Why didn't you wake me, Casper? Think we can snooze all day?"

"You look like you needed the rest."

Understanding flickered in Wills' black eyes, but he put on a hard face. "Worry about yourself, Corporal." He stood. "Gather 'em up."

...

They found a tunnel entrance just before evening. The dirt around the opening appeared fresh and showed boot prints too small to be GI. Wills set the watch and stripped off his pack. When Casper tried to talk him into waiting until morning, Wills shrugged and said, "It's dark down there anyway. Keep 'em straight, Casper. Could get hot in an instant."

"I'm going with you."

"The hell you are." Wills read his expression. "Stay here, Casper. I ain't dried up yet." He gripped his forty-five in one hand and his flashlight in the other, and slithered through the narrow hole.

An hour and forty minutes later, the feeling hit the base of Casper's skull like a well-swung bat. Wills needed him. Wills was *calling* him. He looked at the rest of the boys, but they hadn't stirred.

"I'm going in," he told Big Bob. "You're in charge." The night was dark, the tunnel entrance darker.

"You oughta stay. Sarge'll make it back."

"He needs help, Big. Don't ask me how I know, but I do."

Big soaked that up for a second.

"Be careful," he said at last.

Casper heard something in Big's voice he'd never heard in a veteran member of the Fourth: fear. Casper was feeling some himself. It made him feel alive, like when he'd stepped off that chopper almost a year before. Like the first time he'd crawled the bush.

"I will."

"We gonna be all right?"

"Do like Sarge taught us. Keep your watch, keep hot, and keep quiet. You know the rules. If we ain't back by morning, head in. Understand?"

Big Bob nodded. He was at a loss for words. Or maybe he was too scared to speak.

Casper stared at the small opening. The road that ran by the house he grew up in had a culvert underneath it. He and his friends used to crawl through it, pretending they were invading the enemy stronghold. Not to do it was to be branded a coward, to be called yella' and chicken and have dirt clods thrown at your back. So Casper did it. He hated it, but he did it. And every time he'd emerged from the other side, knees and elbows covered in mud, he'd been surprised that he'd made it through. He tried not to think about how crawling through that culvert made him feel as he slipped into the tunnel.

The red lens on his flashlight cast everything in a ghoulish tint, as though he was looking through glass covered with a thin sheen of blood. The dirt walls of the tunnel pressed close, brushing his shoulders, making the air thick. It was like sucking honey into his lungs. At a crouch, he shuffled along, trying to keep his breathing even, to calm his pounding heart. He felt the tons of earth crouched above, pressing down, teasing him before it crushed him. The weight of his pistol was small comfort.

He thought the tunnel would never end, but he finally came to a room, the dirt floor packed smooth. Empty. Crates lined one wall. A bucket reeking of urine occupied a corner. On the opposite side of the room was the opening to another tunnel. Casper pressed on.

Ten feet into the tunnel, he found the body. Adrenaline knotted his stomach. It was too small to be Wills. The man's throat had been cut. The blood on the dirt floor was black and sticky. He stepped over it and continued, coming to a four-way intersection. He chose the tunnel directly ahead, knowing it was the right way without knowing how. More rooms, two more bodies, more tunnels with twists and turns.

The air grew even more stale, his breath rasped in his ears. He felt trapped in some sort of strange world made up of dirt and dark and stopped time. How long had he been gone? He might have lived his whole life here. What if he never found his way out?

The tunnel opened into a large room, the far walls lost in shadow. Casper stepped down, shining his light. There were tables here, bunks along the wall. Three bodies slumped to the floor by the bunks. Another body by—

"Casper." A wet whisper of a word that made Casper's heart clench. He focused his flashlight on the fourth body, the one against the wall not far

from where he stood.

"Sarge?" He hurried over and knelt.

Wills was a mess, his shirt soaked with blood and plastered to his chest, each shuddering breath accompanied by a wet gurgle.

"Hang on, Sarge. You'll be all right." Casper set down the flashlight and fumbled at Wills' shirt. Find the wound, stop the bleeding. . .

"Thought. . . I had enough. I was. . . wrong," Wills said in a ghost's voice. He grabbed Casper's wrist. "Too late for me."

"I'll get you out of here," Casper said. "They'll fix you up. You can't die. None of us can die!" He was crying.

"Up to you. . . now. Gotta take care. . . of them. Let me. . . tell you." He drew a shuddering breath. A trickle of blood ran from his mouth, dripping off his chin into the soggy mess of his shirt.

"Took over. . . from Edison. You. . . take over from me. Keep them safe. Promise."

"Sarge, I—"

"Promise! Keep them safe!"

Casper knew what Wills was asking. He knew what his fate would be if he accepted. But if he said no. . . How would he live with himself, knowing that men would die so he could live? He nodded.

"I promise."

Wills hooked a hand behind Casper's neck, pulling him down. Sparks the color of a Fourth-of-July sky brightened and began to dance and swirl in Wills' eyes. Casper began to feel a strange, swelling warmth in the center of his skull.

Wills arced, body spasming. A great, wet cough sprayed blood in Casper's face.

Wills went slack.

The swirl of lights faded, the warmth in Casper's head with it.

And the man who couldn't die, died.

...

It took him three hours to get Wills' body back to the entrance. A marine didn't leave one of his own behind, alive or dead.

The boys outside had seen some heat not a half hour back. Sully had taken a hit in the leg. Bones had patched him up, but he needed a real doc. Their fear was thick and reeking as hot tar, but Sarge had drilled them well. They knew the game, even if they'd never played it for keeps.

The half-moon had risen, casting a pale, washed-out light. They gathered around Sarge's body.

Big Bob's voice was hopeful. "Did you. . . ?"

"No," Casper said. "Whatever he had, he took with him."

"So that's it," Big said, sagging like a deflated balloon.

"That's it. Now let's get these boys home, Big."

He pointed as he passed out orders. "Big Bob, you get Sarge. Red

Foot and Milkman on point. Voodoo, help Sully. Tex and Bones drag. The rest spread, five yards between. I'll range. Move it."

The stink of fear faded as they rushed to obey, glad to have someone in charge.

As he helped Big get Wills' body up into a fireman's carry, he thought about home. About hamburgers, French fries, and milk shakes, about working on his Ford Falcon and the smell of his mother's cooking, about the proud yet frightened look in his father's eyes when Casper had been called up.

He thought about his promise to Wills and how he would feel about it when he was sitting in his tent—if he made it *back* to his tent—with a trip home in his hand.

How he'd feel about it sitting home at Joe's slurping on a shake.

If he'd only been a few minutes earlier. . .

They set out for base.

###

About the Author

David Felts currently resides in Odessa, Florida, where he works as a Software Engineer. A retired Air Force Reserve officer, he's had the opportunity to travel to a variety of locations, including San Antonio, Texas; Miami, Florida; Tokyo, Japan; Tucson, Arizona; Montgomery, Alabama; and, Goldsboro, North Carolina. David's the owner and webmaster of SFReader.com, a popular website for fans, writers, and publishers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

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Comrade at Arms

by Gustavo Bondoni

He collapsed into the drift, but felt no cold. Prumathe longed for the bite of the snow to wake him from the numbness, but that sensation would never be his again. The man who'd hit him had walked on, ignoring him. It was a logical enough attitude; after all, the Eluveitie tribesman knew he'd struck the scout hard enough to fracture his skull.

Prumathe pushed himself up from the deep bank, ignoring the new and unaccustomed movement in his head as the pieces of skull grated against each other, and got back to his feet. The man who'd hit him was looking down into the pass, observing the Etruscan camp. He didn't even realize there was someone behind him until Prumathe's hands closed around his neck.

He began to struggle, but a wrench and a snap put a quick end to it. Prumathe sat beside the dead man on cold snow he couldn't feel, pulled a rock out of his tool harness and began to hit the lifeless head with the sharpened side of the stone. Flesh, hair and bone gave way under the onslaught, and the life-giving meat was exposed. This was the ecstasy of the servants of Manus, the only one remaining, and he lost himself in it.

When he surfaced, sated, a ring of men sat around him, expressions cold. These, who had been his friends, would not come within arm's reach.

The saddest part was that he understood it perfectly. Back before crossing the great chasm, Prumathe had been where these men where now: trying to ascertain whether their ally was sated, wanting to make sure it wouldn't turn on them unexpectedly. But mainly, just afraid that he might end up like that someday. A lucky strike by one of the savage northern tribesmen had ended all worries and pain, while at the same time bringing his greatest fear to life. He'd been surprised to find that it no longer frightened him—he was alive, after a fashion, while many others weren't.

And where there was life of any sort, there was hope. Another unexpected discovery.

"How are they arrayed?" one of the men asked. Prumathe had once

known this man's name. He was a captain in the army of the Rasna, or the Etruscans, as others called them. But names were no longer important.

"They aren't. This man was a lone scout, and from what I could see there are no more of them behind for leagues. We can advance and consolidate our position at least as far as the pass." Prumathe felt the loose piece of bone moving around in his head. It felt strange as it vibrated to the sound of his voice.

"Why would they leave the pass unguarded?" The man forgot himself enough to lean closer. "It doesn't make sense. It's the only way for us to get into the valley of the Eluveitie and conquer them. If I were in command, I would put every man I had on that pass."

"They are not there."

The captain nodded and moved back, finally realizing that he'd come within arm's reach. "We'll take the top now, then. Prumathe, take the point. Once you get over the summit, keep walking until you find someone. Then come back and report."

Prumathe nodded. It was an intelligent use of resources. His kind were very hard to kill—or rather, they were already dead, but they were very hard to stop—and would come back with valuable information despite suffering all kinds of damage. An arrow from behind a rock would only serve to reveal the archer's position.

He picked up his sword and trudged up the slope. He passed the place where the scout had died, the bright red streaks in the snow where he'd dragged him off the path, and looked ahead. The summit was still an hour's walk, or more, further ahead. Unlike the blinding, white-capped mountains all around, the pass had been swept clear of snow by the howling wind that blew through it all day. The grey of the rock seemed black against the glare of the surrounding ice.

He wondered if he would find what he was looking for. If magic existed to bring the dead back to life, then, somewhere, the power must exist to bring the living dead back to true life. It was only logical. In fact, it should be even easier. Once the spirit had been returned to the body, free from the underworld, nothing should have been simpler than just touching up a few broken pieces of flesh and organs. It probably wouldn't even take the power of a priest of Manus to do it. Why would the lord of the dead even care? He'd already released the spirit.

One thing was certain: no one in Etruscan land would use their power to free an undead soldier. They were Etruria's most powerful weapon against the forces surrounding her—expansionist Rome on the south and the unyielding Eluveitie to the north—and to free one would be treason.

So it was fortunate that the army he'd been assigned to was heading north. Perhaps, across the mountains, some situation would arise that would allow him to pursue his dream without going against the compulsion placed on him to obey orders from all Etruscan officers. Hopefully, it would happen

before a tribesman hacked him to bits or set him on fire.

The hour had passed. He stood at the top of the pass, leaning into the wind. Below him spread a valley, covered with snow at its upper reaches, but green and fresh with early spring grass at its bottom, miles away. The path led tortuously down, switching back across itself as it snaked towards the valley floor.

Prumathe tried to feel the touch of the wind against his cheeks. There was nothing. He shrugged and began to walk.

As he descended, the other compulsion that he'd been given at his rebirth began to rear its inescapable head. The buzzing in his head that made his life hell. It was only starting, very muted and still bearable, but it was there. Experience had shown that it would grow and grow, driving him to the very brink of madness and beyond, unless he sated the hunger. Only one thing could do that: the still-warm mind of another human being. Man, woman, or child, it made no difference. The slaves they'd fed him at first had been plucked at random from the camp servants.

But now he had to find his own food.

...

It was nearly a full day later that he rejoined the Etruscan soldiers at the top of the pass. They'd located a cave, narrow but deep enough to hold the ten soldiers and their gear.

"We can hold this pass for days, against anything they care to throw against us," the captain boasted, once the fortifications were in place.

On the surface, it seemed the man was correct. The steep path leading up to their position might allow two men to approach side by side—but not to swing their swords with any effectiveness. Plus, the final few steps were so steep that simply rolling rocks down at an enemy would be enough to savage them seriously.

The captain turned to Prumathe. "Tell me, what did you find down there?"

Food, Prumathe thought. I found a little girl playing by a stream. But he said, "There are some farmhouses on the slopes, and a few villages further down. I saw no sign of military activity of any kind."

"No movement of men?"

"Not even a scout. The only men I saw were too young to fight. They were watching sheep."

"Sheep, you say?" A greedy gleam came into the captain's eyes. "Could you go get one for us? I've had enough dried horsemeat to last me for the rest of my life."

Prumathe knew how he would have answered that question if he'd been alive, but he found his feet moving of their own volition, towards the valley once again. He knew he would have to walk for hours down a path lit only by moonlight, and then back up. He had no idea where they would keep the sheep overnight, but he doubted he would be able to take one without

doing a large amount of harm to the farmers themselves. How well the sheep would react to being led up the path at night was anyone's guess. The one thing this allowed him to realize is that the compulsion made no distinction between intelligent orders and idiotic ones. It was something he needed to keep in mind.

He looked around as he walked and counted the small blessings. The most important of these was simply the lack of feeling in his limbs. The biting wind that tugged at his ever-more-ragged clothing was nothing to him, and he could enjoy the clear night. The moonlight was strong, and reflected off the snow, making it easy to see the path. Things could have been worse.

Movement high up on one of the mountains caught his eye. Tiny black specks seemed to be creeping through the snow, well above his level, and even far above the path. It seemed he'd found the missing Eluveitie warriors.

But nothing in his orders for this particular jaunt said anything about reporting enemy troop movement. He was to bring the captain one sheep.

He redoubled his pace.

...

There was a downside to insensitivity, of course. The meat on the spit looked as though it smelled delicious, fat sizzling on the fire and juice running down the length of the cut. Pumethe wondered why the magic that gave him life allowed him to see and hear, but hadn't revived the other senses. It seemed unfair.

As he stared into the glowing embers, something unexpectedly slapped into his back, pushing him forward. He looked down and saw the tip of an arrow and about a hand's span of shaft, strangely unbloodied, protruding from just below his left nipple.

Prumathe turned back to the cave entrance. His eyes had grown accustomed to the fire, and there was little chance he'd be able to spot the attackers.

"Get them!" the captain shouted.

Prumathe's feet, seemingly acting on their own, sped him through the narrow corridor towards the exit. He'd almost reached it when he collided with a man charging into the cavern. They went down in a heap with the Etruscan on top.

He struck before the unseen assailant could react. A quick, sharp blow to the other man's throat crushed cartilage and left the attacker writhing on the floor, gasping for breath.

But the man wasn't alone. Before Prumathe could stand, a crude spear pierced his shoulder from behind, just as he heard at least one more man, probably two, approaching from his right.

He decided to eliminate the immediate threat first. Grasping the haft of the spear, he gave it a mighty jerk. The man holding it stumbled into view —a mere shadow, but at least Prumathe's eyes had adjusted enough to be able

to see the shape against the white snowy backdrop. Dawn seemed about to break, and the slight lightening of the horizon was working in his favor.

With a grunt, Prumathe pulled the spear free, noting without concern that the tip had broken off. It didn't matter. The Eluveitie tribesman in front of him—surely a member of the group he'd seen earlier that night—thought he was facing a critically wounded opponent and advanced confidently, hand forward, presumably holding a blade.

It made no difference. Prumathe was no longer constrained by mortal concerns such as muscle pain. He had supernatural strength, which he used to drive the headless spear deep into the man's stomach, and to make half its length emerge from his back. He didn't even scream as he dropped to the ground, but even in the dim light, Prumathe could see his eyes widen in shock.

The remaining men were a different matter altogether. They came at him simultaneously, each covering the other's side, each waving a short sword or long knife of the type favored by the Eluveitie in close quarters. Prumathe knew they were probably just farm instruments most of the year, but it made no difference—they were deadly in close quarters.

The three men studied one another for a few moments, and Prumathe could almost hear what they were thinking: a man with an arrow wound and a spear wound would be weakened, and the longer they could hold the standoff, the weaker he would become. That was yet another reason the priests of the Rasna, and the officers of the army enjoyed setting the retrieved souls on their enemies. The damage they could cause while the enemy thought they were mere mortals was nearly as devastating as the panic they created when the enemy realized they were facing a warrior that couldn't be killed.

As the enemy waited for him to topple without their help, Prumathe wondered where his comrades were, but immediately dismissed the thought. They were in the cave, safe and warm, probably watching the battle, but trusting their undead minion to win the day. It was only logical; why risk their lives when there was no need.

He stepped towards the Eluveitie, who took a step back, but raised their weapons. If he wanted to fight, their stance said, they would be happy to oblige. Prumathe pulled out his own blade, the standard short Etruscan sword, and attempted to surprise the man on his right with a quick thrust.

The enemy was much too fast for him. He danced back out of reach while his companion grazed Prumathe's ribs.

The undead soldier turned to face the new threat, but the result was the same. The man he was facing would move beyond his reach while the other Eluveitie would strike into his unprotected side. Prumathe seethed at the situation—if the eight men remaining in the cave would only come to his aid, the battle would be over in no time. But he knew they wouldn't.

As the battle dragged on, the dawn light showed the fear and surprise in the attackers' expressions. They couldn't understand why the collection of

wounds he'd accumulated didn't pitch him face-first into the snow.

Eventually, the inevitable happened. Attempting to reach the near attacker, Prumathe overextended and the second man drove his knife between two of his ribs. Everything came to a standstill as both Eluveitie watched him. Prumathe pretended to stagger, pulling the blade out of the man's hand, but immediately corrected, took a step towards his assailant and disemboweled him with a mighty horizontal cut.

Ignoring the screams, he turned to face the other, who did the only logical thing. He ran, heading up the slope.

Prumathe attempted to give chase, but the blade in his chest and the arrow in his back made it difficult to move effectively. By the time he'd removed them, the Eluveitie was a hundred yards away—in that snow, and on that slope, it might have been leagues. Prumathe would never catch him.

Instead, Prumathe looked around. As he suspected, the sentry they'd posted was sitting on the fortification, his throat cut from ear to ear. The undead soldier shrugged—they'd been friends before his transformation, but this death meant little to him. Perhaps his emotions had been removed along with his sense of smell.

The captain and the other Rasna warriors were waiting for him in the cave. Most seemed perfectly relaxed, and a few had even gone back to sleep, trusting their comrades to warn them of any further attacks.

"So, did you get them?"

"All but one," Prumathe replied. He wasn't actually sure of this, as the group he'd spotted earlier had consisted of much more than four men, but he was finding that he could interpret orders to his advantage if they were given in ambiguous language. He wasn't sure how the remaining Eluveitie on the slopes could work in his favor, but he had a hunch that they would.

"Good. Now go out and stand guard. Come and get me if you see anything suspicious."

Prumathe nodded and walked out again.

The very first thing he saw was precisely the kind of activity that the captain meant by 'suspicious'. A group of men, ten or fifteen of them at the least, were working feverishly to place a group of stones in a row. They redoubled their efforts when they saw him.

Prumathe judged the timing carefully. Just as they seemed to finish, he entered the cave. "Captain…" he began.

But he never got to finish. Behind them, a crashing roar, a noise resembling what Prumathe imagined the end of the world would sound like, rang out, and the light from the cave entrance disappeared, leaving them in darkness broken only by the ruddy glow of the embers.

...

"Those cowardly whoresons!" the captain shouted, beating his fist against the packed snow and rocks blocking the exit. "It's going to take us hours to dig our way out of here."

Privately, Prumathe thought that the captain's estimate was on the low side. The Eluveitie had dropped half the mountain's snow onto the cave entrance, and had mixed rocks in for good measure. It would take them a day or two to make a channel back to the surface—and there would probably be a nice little ambush waiting once they got there.

The captain kept complaining about the craven tactics employed by the uncivilized barbarians outside, but Prumathe made no comment.

There were various reasons for his silence. The first was that, privately, he couldn't really say that this attack had been more cowardly than what the Rasna themselves did with their undead soldiers.

Secondly, he preferred to go unnoticed. He was starting to feel the slight tingle that presaged the buzzing in his head, the buzzing that wouldn't go away until he'd fed on a human mind. With days of snow and rock to clear away, there was no chance that he'd be able to wait until they were out of the cave before feeding.

So he tried to be unobtrusive, trying to avoid the problem of the captain ordering him not to eat them. He didn't know what would happen if his two main compulsions had to war against each other, but he was certain it wouldn't be pleasant for him.

He would have to eat the captain first.

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About the Author

Gustavo Bondoni is an Argentine writer with over a hundred stories published in ten countries. His first two books were published in 2010: a collection of Gustavo's previously published stories, *Tenth Orbit and Other Faraway Places*, was released in October, and his short novel, *The Curse of El Bastardo,* in November. His third book, *Virtuoso and Other Stories,* was published in 2011. Gustavo can be found on his website at www.gustavobondoni.com.ar, and his blog, located at http://bondo-ba.livejournal.com/ .

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Angel

by K. R. Cairns

Angel Class trooper Arcadia110786 (0008/0443-SSRI) opens her eyes two minutes before the alarm and cannot remember her dreams. Beside and around her, row upon row of women-at-arms lie in their bunks, awake and silent. Talking isn't prohibited for them, but it doesn't need to be—every one of the three hundred and twenty Angels in the room has had the same life experience as every other. There's simply nothing to discuss.

The alarm goes off, a deep male voice giving orders and praising the Supremacy, and they rise as one. Arcadia makes up her bunk in practiced motions, folding the grey blankets over the limp white sheets and drawing them taut. If she returns to base tonight, she will not sleep here; bunks are assigned by daily lottery to discourage unnecessary attachment to a particular space. Arcadia finishes her task within milliseconds of the soldiers around her. After eighteen years, the entire unit has routine down to a science.

Arcadia wears her standard-issue night-shift and a thick felt undergarment that extends from above her nipples to below her knees. The barracks are cool at night, but not cool enough to warrant this kind of covering. Its purpose is not to keep the Angels warm, but to prevent licentious behavior and, as the Supremacy Charter's chapter on the armed forces states, "to promote the value of modesty and virtue in our women-at-arms." Arcadia only takes it off to wash and fight.

After the bunks are made, the voice over the loudspeakers directs the troops to the mess hall, where breakfast is being served. The women file out in neat rows, broad-shouldered and crop-haired. They are strikingly uniform, not only in dress and bearing, but nearly alike in size, shape, and coloring. This is true for any unit of Angels, for one very simple reason: every one of these women has the same biological mother. At the age of twelve, every Angel goes through a procedure to remove her ovaries, leaving two cross-shaped scars Arcadia could still find by touch if it weren't covered by a half-inch of felt. Their ovaries are placed in a cryogenic locker, saved towards the future

like blankets in a hope chest. If Arcadia's military prowess is judged sufficient, if she distinguishes herself in service, her eggs will be thawed, harvested, and combined with female-producing seed of the City Fathers of the Supremacy to breed a new crop of Angels. If Arcadia distinguishes herself in service, she won't be alive to see this.

Breakfast, like military food since the dawn of recorded history, is earnest, unappealing, and served under fluorescent lighting. In addition to her eggs and slab of whitish ham, each Angel swallows a small yellow pill. The Angels are not told what the pills are for. They are expected not to ask.

Small talk around the breakfast table is intended to boost unit morale. Arcadia turns to the soldier on her right.

"How was your mission yesterday?"

"Successful. Every day brings us closer to victory."

"God blesses the Supremacy."

"Praise the Supremacy. Praise God."

Variations on the theme propagate through the mess hall. Arcadia goes back to her eggs.

Arcadia is going on a mission today. It was assigned last night, delivered to her minutes before bed. She knows its parameters by heart already. After the showers, when most of the girls are split up for their training exercises, she will proceed down a long tubular hall to a warehouse-like room to get her gear. She'll undress in the staging area, pulling off her shift and woolens to stand bare but for her fishtags—so called because of the stylized fish emblem above her name and numbers. The metal will be warm, but will cool slowly against her lips as she prays:

Oh Lord, Almighty God, crush my enemy. Drive him before me. Let me hear the lamentations of his women. Happy are we that dash his children against the rocks. Let his impure blood nourish the Supremacy's fields.

Oh Lord, give me victory, and give my enemy death.

She'll pull on the chunky reflective suit which protects her from heat and cold but nothing else, strap on the chest plate with its shoulder-mounted kinder-guns, lock in the helmet and respirator. The last articles of loricae, her foot-thrusters and arm-mounted flechette guns, will have to be put on by another Angel when she is already harnessed to the drop shaft platform. Molded to fit around her feet and shins, the thrusters make walking impossible. Similarly, the smooth white barrels of the guns are wrapped seamlessly around both arms, pinning her hands around the trigger. Don't get an itch you wouldn't want to scratch with artillery fire.

After this there'll be nothing but the long descent through the upper atmosphere, Arcadia watching the Supremacy's satellite cities fall away above her, becoming a web of criss-crossed filaments that glitter in the lightening sky. Nothing except the growing tension in the pit of her stomach and the prayers.

Oh Lord.
Oh Lord.
Oh God.
...

It should have been routine. Sector 8 rarely "gave trouble", to use the City Fathers' phrase for areas where Angel casualties are highest. Arcadia had been strafing her pattern as usual, listening to her operator's flat, bored voice as he read out the numbers and benedictions. Roll 15 degrees left. He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms. Keep your nose up.

Then she's spinning, pinwheeling, everything wrong at once. Klaxons are blaring to tell her that her angle puts her on a collision course with the ground. One engine is out—maybe a bird strike? Arcadia didn't feel anything. Now her world is pure vertigo, and she tries to focus on keeping her corkscrew roughly parallel to the earth instead of perpendicular to it. At some point she blacks out. When she comes back to herself, pale gold blades of einkorn are slapping gently against her visor. The inside of the carapace feels slick. Arcadia twists her neck to look down across her body, and immediately passes out again.

When she wakes again, something is staring at her. A two-legged creature—a person? Nothing like any person Arcadia has ever seen. It has an ugly face, like an animal from Arcadia's storybooks about animals, and knobby joints covered in yellow calluses. And it is doing something to Arcadia's legs. Trying to pull off her thrusters. *Supremacy tech must not fall into the hands of the enemy*, comes the voice of a thousand days' drills. She kicks out weakly. The creature startles, drops her legs, and runs away, hollering. Having neutralized the threat, Arcadia focuses on trying to roll over. Her flight suit, so graceful in aerial motion, is dead weight on the ground. Her aching limbs can't shift the bulky loricae. Arcadia has been landing crew before, joining four of her batch-sisters in working the latches and valves to extricate a sweat-slick Angel from her suit following a mission, but she has no idea how to go about freeing her own arms. Her guns are empty—too bad this didn't happen early in her strafing run.

Before she can even lift herself upright, a crowd of grotesques have gathered around her, led by the shouting creature. They are marked by a weird variety of faces and bodies, different ways of standing and crouching to peer at her. Many parts of them are bared to the sky, in defiance of God's laws. Arcadia is certain she's going to die, but she can't really move, so she watches them back. She's pretty sure some of them are males, because they have the deep vocal tones she associates with the pronouncements of the City Fathers. The bodies of these ones look strange to her—but then, they all do.

The shouting one is describing how he came to find Arcadia, with mime clear enough for even her to follow along. Every few seconds, the eyes of each of the creatures flick towards a large-sized one with a straight back,

who is listening quietly with arms folded. The enemy Commander, Arcadia surmises. When the shouting one finishes his story, another—who leans on a branch because her leg ends in an upsetting smooth stump—makes a passionate appeal to the Commander, pointing vehemently at Arcadia and imploring. . . something. The Commander frowns. He speaks to a group of unbent male creatures, and they bow their heads to him and leave the group together. He then turns to two of the smaller creatures, and they move closer to Arcadia as he and the rest of the crowd disperse.

The two who remain crouch down and run their hands over Arcadia's suit. One has a smooth, dark face and a curious curving body. The other is tiny, with white hair and a face composed entirely of cracks. Arcadia can't stop looking at her, wondering what could have happened. They feel around Arcadia's shoulders, finding the latches that remove her helmet. Both of them look shocked when they pull it away and see her face. As they feel around her carapace for other latches, they talk to each other, and now Arcadia can hear one word repeated again and again—*Samartah*. She speculates on what it might mean. *Enemy*. *Kill*. *Steal*. But this rings false to her. They touch her carefully, like the medics who treat the Angels' training injuries. They don't saw off her head or pierce her side with a spear, as enemies were always doing in the Bible.

The suit has mostly protected Arcadia from the fall, though she is heavily bruised and the muscles in her thighs and shoulders feel torn. One hand spasms uncontrollably when they wrest it from the flechette apparatus, and Arcadia can't resist a little sob of pain. The smaller medical creature pats her and makes soothing noises. The other covers her nakedness with a scratchy blanket. The group of four men-creatures return with a stretcher—a woven mat over some sticks—and they move her through a village of around eighty tiny dwellings to a cramped hut. Inside is dark and a little warm, and Arcadia is asleep before she can stop herself.

In her dream she is surrounded by flame, and beyond that the man-creatures are dancing. Their limbs contort and stretch like putty, sickeningly loose and shapeless. Arcadia looks down at her own body, and sees her feet drop away as her legs and arms elongate into white lines. She is flying out of control, wheeling and whirling above the fire and the dancers. The sky spirals from white through darker and darker blue until it becomes the black of space near her home station. But the stars are too bright and too large, like rays of sunlight through a patchy roof. She is awake, still in the village. The door of her hut is open, and she can see the one-legged woman stopping and staring at her, the expression on her beastlike face unreadable to Arcadia.

It's hard to tell how much time passes. Arcadia's routine is gone. The medics keep returning with bowls of a bland, bitter white paste. Arcadia eats it and does not die. She doesn't know what's going to happen to her. She runs through the abstractions from her training—capture, interrogation, torture—and none of them seem to apply. She gets better after a while, and stands up

on shaking legs, a foot and a half taller than the biggest of the villagers.

She walks, occasionally stumbling, around the village. It is filled with children and fat ground-birds and four-legged animals. The children screech and run when she walks by them. Arcadia can sympathize: the adult Angels had always been terrifying to her as a child, towering and hard-faced, imposing the Supremacy's discipline. Here children seem to be allowed to run wild. The grown-up villagers do not run from Arcadia, but also seem afraid when she walks by them. They call her *Samartah*. She tells them her name is Arcadia110786. You can tell your interrogators that much. They call her *Samartah-Arcady*. She learns how to ask what something is called, and asks everyone this question relentlessly.

The two medics are kind to her, and ready to explain the life of the village. Everyone is preoccupied with finding food to eat, and there are apparently extended periods of harsh cold when grain has to be stored and rationed. Once she has decided that her initial impression of the village as full of enemies was mistaken, she offers to help with the growth and storage of the grain. The medics look horrified, and tell her that she must never touch any food other than what is given to her, because she is *Samartah*. But they won't tell her what it means.

Arcadia becomes obsessed with looking at Charla, the woman with one leg. An accident in the birthing matrix, perhaps? But then why wouldn't the villagers have flushed her tube before her gestation was done? Many of them seem to have defects of one kind or another—loose, wrinkled skin, pigment disorders, and bodily weakness seem to be especially common—but Charla's seems especially detrimental to her productivity. She can't bring in the harvest or grind grain with the others, but instead seems to spend most of her time hobbling from her hut up to the Commander's to shout at him for allowing *Samartah* to live in the village. The Commander explains to her each time that *Samartah-Arcady* is not a threat, but a protector, a charm which will induce *Samartah* to think on them favorably. *Samartah* is the Supremacy, then: Arcadia's people. Arcadia thinks he is wise. A good Commander, though his orders are never very direct or succinct.

The winter is the worst thing Arcadia has ever experienced. Cold seeps through every crack in her hut's wooden slats, her fingers and face are raw red, and she starves on a meagre diet. The animals and birds of the village slowly disappear, and after she comes across one of the villagers coated in the quickly-freezing blood of a whiskery pig he is methodically eviscerating, she realizes that she and the villagers are eating them.

One day when she goes to meet the medics, there is a whole group of villagers gathered at the healing hut. The younger medic is nowhere to be seen in the crowd, but when it parts as the villagers pull away from Arcadia and huddle against each other, she sees the familiar curving body. The younger medic is lying on a stretcher, wrapped in a thin white cloth. Arcadia comes and kneels next to the silent older medic, and touches the rounded belly of her

friend. It is cold and hard as ice. In the evening, Arcadia helps set up a bonfire, and the whole village gathers around as the medic's body is burned. Charla cannot stop shouting at the Commander about what a terrible omen this is, and how they will be without a healer when the old medic is gone, and isn't this all, in some way, Arcadia's fault.

Arcadia thinks about death. She is aware that her unit is down by around a hundred Angels, from its original number of four hundred and forty-three, but she's never seen a body before. Her fallen batchsisters are memorialized by having their names and numbers read out over the loudspeakers over breakfast, and everyone will respectfully fall silent for a few minutes to honor their sacrifice. Once, she remembers, Adichia190927 returned from a mission and as soon as she was out of the suit, she started screaming blasphemies up at the speaker and refused to stop. Every one of the Angels heard her, but everyone pretended deafness. The next day Adichia had to be wrestled into the suit by six Angels working together, and she didn't return that night or any other. Her name had never been read out in memorial, and Arcadia had always wondered what became of her. She wonders if her own name has been read for her sisters.

Arcadia rides out the winter, though her hands have become callused and knobby. She perceives that this is simply what happens to people who live out here. The elements bite at them, and they wear away. Charla's leg, she finally understands, is not the way she was made, but something that has happened to her in the past and healed over. The old medic is much quieter than the young one was, but she teaches Arcadia about a few herbs, and Arcadia talks to her about the proper procedure for immobilizing and retraining breaks and sprains.

One day, Arcadia sees white streaks across the sky. The source of each contrail glints in the sunlight as they both pass overhead. A familiar pattern: the two-angel recon. Enemy population centers are IDed for follow-ups. Arcadia runs out waving and jumping up and down. The procedure for capture was always a bit unclear—"wait for rescue" doesn't tell you how rescue will be enacted, and she's never seen any Angel with landing capabilities—but she figures this is probably acceptable action.

The two contrails kink suddenly. The Angels have seen her, reported her position, and they're being ordered back to base. A flush of joy washes over Arcadia. She runs to the medic, to tell her the good news.

"My sisters are coming back for me! God be praised!" Arcadia's smile is not met with the same from the old woman. She presses on. "I need to put on my gear, so we can go away together. Back to my home in the sky."

Arcadia is somewhat confused when the old medic hobbles out of the healers' hut, shouting that *Samartah* is coming, and telling everyone to run. Arcadia steps blinking into the sunlight, and into a village in uproar. Children have been scooped up under people's arms and animals freed from their pens. Arcadia thinks of Charla, and her halting gait. She jogs a slow lope up the

rows of houses, towards Charla's place. It's not clear what the panic is, but maybe Arcadia can help somehow. They've done so much for her.

The village Commander is on the ground. Blood is sinking into the dirt beside him, pumping out of a wide slice in his throat. The body, and Charla standing over it, are the only still things in the chaotic village. The woman looks up at Arcadia defiantly.

"He brought *Samartah* into the village! Now he can have what he wanted for the rest of us." Charla holds the broad threshing blade, sticky and dripping. Arcadia suddenly understands the familiar, obscured word: *Death*. You brought death into the village. Arcadia backs away from the grisly tableau, shaking her head. She is a protector. A good-luck charm. She keeps the Angels from hurting anybody, any one of the people who have cared for her.

Across the sky, Arcadia sees a broad V, maybe a dozen Angels, trailing a stripy chevron of exhaust. This, too, is a familiar pattern: *Sanitize*. The trainers had always referred to the enemy this way, as a disease of the land, a pollution, a contamination. Arcadia thinks of her fever the first night, and of the medics' cool ministrations.

Arcadia can smell sulphur on the hot wind which blows from the miles-wide wall of fire the Angels are laying down. She thinks of the people in the village who have seen her face, watched her hair grow and her hands callus, seen her eat and smile and mourn, who know that the death-creatures in the sky are as human as any of them. She thinks she knows what contamination her sisters are trying to cleanse. But she can only watch as their wall of annihilation speeds toward the village, the heat of the flame shimmering high into the sky.

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About the Author

K. R. Cairns is an American writer and graphic artist. Cairns has lived in Tacoma, Boulder, and Glasgow, Scotland. She's been on a lot of planes.

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Grins and Gurgles

The Rocketeer

by John Harrower

Tally ho! The call of my ally through the radio receiver in my helmet tells me we've spotted another one, and damn and blast it if he isn't going the way of his crashed comrades. I stand in the cargo hold of The British Army Dirigible Number 2, watching as our boys in the Sopwith Camels recon the sky, tearing through and ducking round clouds, looking for the forces of the Luftstreitkräfte. The twice-damned huns know we are here, we are in their airspace quite on purpose, and they are sending all the resources they can to clear us out. I'm pleased to report it isn't going very well for them, due mainly to them not expecting me, Captain Q.L.R. Winstanley-Happenstance, Codename: The Rocketeer.

I step over the edge of the cargo bay door, into nothing, and ignite my rocket pack. Spinning, but not falling, I move into formation and peer through my shaded visor, trying to locate the Fokkers. My career in the Royal Flying Corps has been, not wishing to blow my own trumpet, meteoric in its rise: I'd flown in over 60 air combat missions, all of which were a success. So when the lab lads dreamed up this one-man aerial strike rocket pack, there was only one man they asked to test it, the ace-of-aces, my good self. Since strapping it onto my back I've flown a further 18 missions, downing a multitude of Boche fighters, balloons, and, in one exceptional case, a zeppelin. There is only one man in this war with greater mastery of the air than I, my nemesis, my dark mirror, Manfred von Richthofen: The Red Baron.

We have not crossed paths this entire war, leading some to suspect (myself included) that the Kaiser has been keeping him from areas they know I've been combat active in. Hence our current objective, maintaining a strong presence in German airspace to taunt and hopefully flush him out. I receive a transmission and adjust my trajectory, scorching through the skies and

drawing my British Bulldog service revolver in anticipation. The Camels know what to do—we have practiced this move in the air dozens of times now —they distract the rear gunners of their planes, while I close in for the kill. The enemy are up ahead.

My brothers tear over my head, engaging in evasive action, and I single out my first victim. The gunner in the rear of the Kraut biplane is swinging his machine gun in an arc, determined to end the wheeling Camel and failing to notice me. I punish him for his recklessness with a stiff right hook to the chin, then blast a hole in the back of the pilot's head with my pistol, watching as he spirals down towards obliteration. Add another notch to the kill count. I have no time to spare; the Fokkers know where I am, and I must escape a death of hot bullets. I launch towards our dirigible, which is laying down support fire into the dogfight, intending to circle it then bring down another plane, when I notice something unusual. Out of the blood red sky comes a triplane, in matching wartime hues, the distinctive appearance of von Richthofen.

Abandoning my retreat with the Victoria Cross shining in my eyes, I give the rocket an extra kick, really give her the gun, to cross the expanse of sky between myself and the Baron. More bullets screech past me in swarms, I wear no armour but for my military gear, designed to keep me warm, but not bulletproof. The buzz of the Camel crews in my ears tells me they see what I do, and before I can close on my target the Baron shoots down a fine soldier and good friend of mine with callous precision. I meet the triplane head on, getting to the cockpit the only way I can think how to: by leaping over the deadly propellers. I seize the pilot by the lapels, the forces exerted on me threatening to flip me into the sky to be devoured by the German birds of prey. The Baron beats me with his fists while trying to wrench his plane from a tailspin, I have to look into his eyes before I end him. All around me is sound and fury. My body is thrown around like a gollywog toy, ears catching snatches of machine gun German. I let go of the Baron’s crimson flying scarf and use a hand to force his goggles and helmet from his head. I ready myself to greet my arch-enemy to find. . . An imposter! It is not the Baron at all, but a jerry ruse to lure me from safety. The crafty huns, anyone would think they were Chinamen. I have no time to feel foolish, however, and send the bastard to his grave with a shot between the eyes. Then I spring from the suddenly plummeting triplane to find that my Wing have destroyed or chased off the rest of the Fokkers. I communicate to them that it hadn’t been the Baron and tell them it’s time to refuel. There will be another day. As we turn into the savage skies, I try to raise our spirits with a rousing cheer of the Royal Flying Corps’s motto: "Through adversity to the stars!"

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About the Author

John Harrower 26, WM, NS, GSOH, OMG, WLTM interested

individuals that he can shamelessly use as characters in his flash fiction or put in ridiculous and often fantastical situations for embarrassing effect. Find him in Glasgow, Scotland, scrawling non sequiturs in underpasses.

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Refugees

by James S. Dorr

Wherever the army went, it left starvation behind it. In the wood of Atlos, for instance, Sir Geoffrey had camped for nearly two weeks and encouraged his men-at-arms to hunt the forest bare, his yeomen to fish its streams to depletion, while his engineers cut down trees to build the great siege machines that would later be needed—the wait didn't matter. Similarly, when the army, like a gorging worm exposed to the sun, quit the forest's tree-lined tunnels and broke out in a skirmish line into the farmland that lay beyond, he had his soldiers fire the fields and all the buildings, driving the peasants before them toward the enemy's stronghold. These were the refugees of war.

When that much had been accomplished, he stood in his stirrups to measure the damage. "I dare say that not even a rat could find the wherewithal to stay *here*," he told Montcourant, his aide-de-camp. "All is now burned, just as I ordered it. All is barren."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey," Montcourant, a younger man, answered. "I still

wonder, though, at such completeness in your destruction. Could not some storehouses have been retained as a base of supply at our army's rear? That way, should we fall on hard times. . . "

"No, Montcourant. Laying waste everything behind is a secret both Sir Lowell and I learned when, together, we rode on Crusade. There were always more fields ahead, but, even if not, we took enough only to support us on the march, burning everything else we could find. That way, our enemies knew that they could expect no relief—No new force, even if it could have been raised, would have found enough left to our rear to sustain it. And, as for our own army, each man knew that, if he wanted to find new supplies, he could only advance. . ."

"In this case, it no longer being a Crusade, we can only advance to Sir Lowell's castle. Is that right, my lord?"

"To Sir Lowell's castle, yes, Montcourant—to the castle he won when the Crusade was ended and we returned home. And where, unless my old comrade in arms has much changed in the meantime, he'll not only have gold in plenty, but also granaries full to the rafters that he'll be reluctant to open for even his own defenders."

...

The army continued, ravishing towns and destroying new fields, just as its commander ordered. At times, some of those that it opposed would stand and fight and would be destroyed, too, until those that were dead outnumbered the living. At these times the corpses would be burned as well as the things they'd thought they might have been able to defend.

The army took its time in this labor—it didn't matter. Sir Geoffrey was not in any hurry. In fact, he explained to Montcourant, the more time required to reach the castle, the better prepared that fortification would be for its conquest.

"The weak are the ones who flee before us," he told his aide. "They take their defeat and their sickness with them to press on Sir Lowell, to crowd with him inside his towers and walls. The strong, now—those are the ones who die here."

Montcourant laughed, and the army continued to wend its slow, all-devouring way over what had before been lush fields and valleys. All was made desert until, at last, the vanguard reached the low range of hills that overlooked its destination.

It was already late afternoon, but Sir Geoffrey gave orders to continue until the crest of the last hill was reached, then set his tent there. Once that was done, he rested beneath its gaily striped awning and gazed to the plain that now lay below him, surrounding the castle. The sun was just setting, a night fog just beginning to drift in, yet, even in fast-approaching darkness, he wondered that some of the shadows he saw surrounding the fortress seemed deeper than others. He wondered, too, that in that last light he saw ravens circling.

...

The following morning, he took his army down onto the plain and saw what the last night's shadows had been. Bodies—hundreds of swollen corpses—lay littered in heaps around the castle, as if some army had come before his and had met defeat there. Yet the corpses neither faced the castle's wall nor had their backs toward it, as if they'd been struck down in retreat, but rather lay, arms and legs akimbo, twisted and turned in every direction.

"What do you make of this, Sir Geoffrey?" Montcourant asked.

Sir Geoffrey started to form a reply when he heard a whirring sound, followed immediately by another and then by a third. Then, three loud clicks, almost in unison, and, as he and Montcourant stared, three new bodies flew out from behind the castle walls.

"Engineers, bring up the trebuchet and the other machinery," he shouted to those who waited behind him. "Set them into working order on that far rise—they'll be out of the castle's range there." Then he turned back to his aide-de-camp and began to laugh.

"Sir Lowell has catapults, it seems. He uses them to return our gifts to us—the peasants who've fled from us to his castle to seek refuge inside."

"I don't understand," Montcourant said.

"These are the diseased that Sir Lowell hopes to cast from him. He's worked them strengthening his defenses, no doubt first confiscating whatever supplies they were able to bring in their flight, and now that they are weakened more he can use them no longer. Even then, though, he's waited too long—the real disease they carried was panic. That's one reason we moved so slowly on our march forward, to give his own soldiers plenty of time to dwell on the fear the peasants brought inside."

Another three whirs and clicks interrupted—another three bodies flew over the wall and landed, thudding, on the already corpse-strewn plain.

"This one's still alive, I think," Sir Geoffrey heard one of his men's voices call, and he shouted back to leave it alone. He shrugged and faced Montcourant again.

"Even now, though, he's too late in acting. His best defenders have been with him too long. They know him almost as well as I do and know that what he's supplied them with thus far has been from the store the peasants brought with them. But, that he casts the peasants out now tells them one thing more, that the food he's stolen is almost exhausted. And, that he casts out some who are still able-bodied enough to survive their fall, however briefly, tells his men also that Sir Lowell is miser enough that he'd sacrifice those who were still useful to him before he'd open his own stores to feed them."

...

All that day and half the next the bulk of the army sat, watching the castle intermittently jettison men. Beyond that, save for an occasional range-testing arrow, it was as if the walls' defenders had not yet come to the

realization that they were besieged. On the rise Sir Geoffrey had chosen, however, his engineers had been hard at work, assembling iron-tipped battering rams and wheeled, moving towers and, its catapult arm rising higher than even the enemy's towers it would be used against, the great trebuchet. Then, after that day-and-a-half was over, he sent men up to the tops of the hills that surrounded the fortress to bring down boulders, the smaller of these, still almost larger than three men could handle, to be used for shot, while the largest, grooved and strapped into a frame, would be the counterweights that would give the engine its power. The work continued throughout the night until, when dawn of the second day came, the machine was ready.

Sir Geoffrey's engineers took the range from their rise to the castle and, using a series of ropes and pulleys, began to crank the trebuchet's arm down. They rolled an ammunition stone into the sling at the tip of its longer section—the arm itself, lashed to a pivot three-fourths of the distance to its counterweighted butt, had once been a whole tree—and waited for their commander's nod. Receiving their order, they sprang to the side and pulled its release cord.

Not with a whir, but a groan of straining timber, the bow-bent tree straightened along its length, and, rising almost slowly at first as its counterweighted end descended, it slammed, not with a clicking sound but an earth-shaking crash, into the padded framework set over the engine's mid-section. The sling whipped past the tip of the arm and the stone rose higher, hanging in air, until it too descended into the castle's courtyard.

"Shorten your distance," Sir Geoffrey shouted. "Aim for the corner below the near tower. The wall there is old, despite its improvements, and, if I guess rightly, the stonework within will be as rotten as the spirits of those who'd defend it."

The sergeant in charge of the engineers nodded, and, after the arm had been drawn down again, a task that took nearly an hour in itself, he made an adjustment to the sling. The second shot rose even higher but, its arc sharper, struck with a splitting of mortar and rock at the tower's base.

Satisfied now, Sir Geoffrey smiled. He went to assemble the rest of his army and, ten hours later, seven more shots having breached its wall from tower to gatehouse, the castle surrendered.

...

"My men are hungry as well, Sir Lowell," he said as they enjoyed wine with the last of the peasant-brought stores in the castle's feast hall. Even candles were in short supply as the gloom about the room's rafters attested. "The march has been long, and, as you no doubt still know from the old days, armies that I command travel lightly."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey," the other replied, a man of about the same age as his conqueror, but going to plumpness. "As you've guessed, my granary is still sealed. I'd realized that it was you who hoped to take my castle from the reports the refugees brought in, and I know, too, that you've always insisted

on fairness in victory. Because of that, I have saved it for you."

Sir Geoffrey laughed. "Along with your gold—kept forcibly away from all others for my sake, I dare say. But you're right about my being fair. Because, at one time, we were even friends, you can expect at least some of your gold back, along with an officer's post in my army if you'll agree to it and, mayhap, a chance to win a new castle later. The first thing, however, is food for my soldiers."

The other chuckled as well in reply. "We go too far back, you and I, Sir Geoffrey, to quarrel at details. I accept your post and, as you suggest, perhaps a chance to gain a new stronghold as your liegeman. For now, though, as you say, the grain to bake bread to keep *both* our forces from suffering hunger overly much."

The heavier man rose, and Sir Geoffrey followed, still in his armor, as a servant handed them torches. They went alone into the fortress's passageways, then down a narrow, dark course of stairs to the vaults beneath it, turning at its foot into a twisting maze of tunnels. "I take it you *do* want to see the grain first, then," Sir Lowell said as they came to a branch and, as his conqueror grunted assent, led the way down yet another staircase.

"The men's need, at this point, must always come first," Sir Geoffrey said as he followed after, ever downward, into the earth's womb. He glanced, as they walked, at the heavy overhanging ceiling, the rough-hewn walls with gaping cracks at their corner joinings, seemingly pressing closer each time one or the other of the torches guttered, its flame momentarily burning low.

"Hungry, they fight well, but after a victory they *must* be fed royally lest they turn against their commanders. Gold, on the other hand, always can wait until tomorrow—you know that, Sir Lowell."

"I've learned that, yes, Sir Geoffrey," the man who continued ahead of him said. "We've served good masters, you and I, in the art of war. We've enjoyed war together. But did you see, outside, the ravens that flew above the towers? They brought me ill luck in the siege today—helped in my choice to surrender to you."

"Men make their own luck," Sir Geoffrey replied, glad for the comfort of conversation. He disliked tunnels, not so much for fear of their closeness or even the dark, but for the stillness one found within them. They made him feel helpless—alone and trapped. "Are we almost there?"

"Almost, Sir Geoffrey. You know, it was really the peasants who beat me. Your army did its work almost too well, driving them to me. I'd never seen so many peasants before, first disrupting the drills of my soldiers, then, even though I doled some food back to them, starting to steal. . . "

Another turn, and the tunnel widened. Then, in the dimness, a sealed wooden door.

"A moment, now, while I find the key," Sir Lowell said as he shifted his torch into his left hand and used the other to reach in his clothing. He brought out a huge flared shaft of iron and, fitting it carefully into a hole in the

door's right side, he began to twist it.

"As you say," Sir Geoffrey went on, raising his voice above the screech of the lock's stiff metal, "we've learned to enjoy warfare, you and I. Even as you stand here opening your castle to me, it's the peasants—the refugees—who've really suffered. Yet we're the survivors, the ones who'll go on to fight larger battles, to win richer castles. Do you suppose, as the priests suggest, that there'll come a time when our sins will catch up to us?"

"I don't know, Sir Geoffrey—ah! There we are now." The plump man returned the key to his belt, then put his torch carefully down on the floor. He used both hands to pull the latch that started the heavy door swinging open. "I don't hold much with priests myself. I. . ."

Sir Lowell's voice rose up into a scream as he staggered backward, clawing at a shifting mass that covered his face and his upper body. Sir Geoffrey pushed past him, drawing his sword, then dropped it and thrust out his own torch instead.

Inside the storeroom, the grain was destroyed, devoured completely by thousands of rats—the true refugees from the fields and the barnyards his army had laid waste. They covered the granary's walls and floor like a living tapestry, and, having spoiled all that was there, the rats, too, were hungry.

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About the Author

James Dorr has two collections from Dark Regions Press, *Strange Mistresses: Tales of Wonder and Romance* and *Darker Loves: Tales of Mystery and Regret,* while his all-poetry *VAMPS (A Retrospective)* came out last August (2011) from Sam's Dot Publishing. An active member of SFWA and HWA with nearly four hundred appearances in venues from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* to *Xenophilia* and *The Yellow Bat Review*, Dorr invites readers to visit his site at http://jamesdorrwriter.wordpress.com for the latest information.

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The Home Front

by David G. Turner

Jake stood in the grocery store parking lot, watching the bus depart. He was home, but he didn't feel at home. Clouds held back the sun, and his lightweight camouflage jacket did little to shed the cool morning breeze. Jake shivered.

Just get it over with, he urged himself. Jake shouldered his duffel bag for the trek down Center Street. His eyes scanned the street for signs of his future dream. Like all the dreams before, this one had been a jumble of images, some ordinary, some painful. There was no telling which scene would be next to enter his waking world.

When he reached the barbershop, a siren split the air. Jake ducked behind a nearby parked car. An ambulance rushed by him, shortly followed by a police squad car. Jake watched them pass; a knot formed in his stomach. It was a police car, but not *the* police car. His dream hadn't come yet. Jake dusted himself off and pulled open the barbershop door.

A chime sounded as he crossed the threshold. An old man in a flannel shirt sat in one of the waiting room chairs, holding a cup of coffee. He distantly remembered the man's name — Mike Eldridge, one of the town selectmen.

Polish Pete the barber interrupted the shave he was giving and waved at an empty waiting room chair.

"Have a seat, soldier. I should be able to get to you in about fifteen minutes." He turned back to his chair.

Eldridge squinted at the name on Jake's uniform. "Don't you recognize this kid, Pete? It's Mitch Connelly's boy, Jacob." Eldridge introduced himself—he had remembered the name correctly—and told him the man in the chair was Don Alger.

"Hundred and First Airborne," Alger said. He said it with pride.

He's going to get it wrong, Jake thought. *And there's nothing I can do*

to stop it. Acid rose in his throat

"Pete, can I use your bathroom?"

"Go ahead."

The bathroom was small, but clean. Jake had to drop his duffel on the floor outside. As soon as the door was closed, he knelt before the toilet and retched. His eyes watered.

After his stomach was empty, Jake flushed the toilet and rose to wash his hands. He splashed some water into his mouth, then spit it back into the sink. The face in the mirror looked older than he remembered.

When he opened the bathroom door, two new faces had been added to the barbershop crowd. A young boy, perhaps seven or eight, sat on one of the wooden chairs, looking up at the ceiling fan. His feet swung back and forth beneath the seat. Beside him was a woman, presumably the boy's mother. Her blonde hair was cut in a short bob, and her eyes were a piercing blue. They were just like Julie's eyes.

He had seen those eyes in a dream every night for a month. Even when his squad needed him to dream for them, to keep them safe, Julie's eyes accused him instead. He had to get past those eyes, or Psi Corps would be done with him.

Jake gripped the door frame. He felt himself falling into her gaze. The dream was calling him again, and he couldn't move.

After a moment, Eldridge rescued him. "You feeling all right, Jacob?" he asked. "You look pale."

Jake shook his head. "It's just the drugs." He was suddenly aware of the young boy, staring at him. "I mean the meds, Mr. Eldridge." The blonde woman frowned at him. "Psi Corps," he explained.

Alger grunted from the barber chair. "Back in the Gulf, I got hit with some stuff that made me pretty sick. Left me with an ugly cough, too."

Pete chuckled. "More than likely, Don, it's that nasty smoking habit you picked up over there."

"Could be, but I still plan to live some before I die."

Jake glanced at the coffee pot near the door. "Pete, do you mind if I have a cup?"

"Help yourself."

He poured some of the dark brew into a disposable cup and slurped up a mouthful, feeling it burn his tongue. The coffee had set too long on the warmer; its taste was harsh and bitter. Still, it was hot, and strong enough to cover the taste of bile in his mouth. Jake closed his eyes for a moment and felt it flow down his throat. When he opened his eyes, Alger was standing in front of him with his hand outstretched.

"I'd like to thank you, Corporal, for serving our country."

"Specialist," he muttered.

"What's that?"

"I'm an E-4 specialist. Corporal is a command rank. Psi Corps soldiers

don't give orders."

Alger turned red. "Sorry about that, son. They keep changing the damned insignia."

Jake set down the pot of coffee to free his right hand, but Alger had gone to pay Pete by the time he turned back to face him. Jake shared his embarrassment, but didn't speak.

Eldridge picked up the pot, refilling his cup. He returned it to the warmer. "Are you really a dreamer, Jacob?" he asked.

"That's what they call me. Nothing special." It was the meds that made him dream, whether he wanted to or not.

"It's impressive to think that anyone can see the future. It's great the way you keep our boys safe over there."

Jake opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. He watched Pete hand a few bills' change to Alger, who gave one back and slipped quietly out the door. Pete picked up a broom, and began sweeping up.

"You think you can dream me up a winning lottery ticket?"

"Sorry, Pete, it doesn't work that way. We only see stuff we're going to live through, and then it's only the stuff with strong emotional content."

The look on the blonde woman's face had changed from contempt to concern. "So all your dreams are nightmares?"

"Every night."

"And what happens after you dream? Can you avoid them? I mean, the really bad ones?"

"You mean, like this one?" He tried to smile at her, and failed. She stared at him, unblinking, and he fell back into her stare. *Those eyes don't have to hate me. They don't have to accuse me, but they will.*

"Jacob?" This time it was Pete calling him back. Jake paused to take another pull at his coffee, then continued.

"When a dream is really bad, you can't avoid it. It just keeps coming back until you live it for real."

"Is that why you dreamers don't have a command rank?"

Jake shrugged. Eldridge moved his coffee cup into his left hand and offered him the other. "You're a brave man, Jacob."

Jake looked at the hand for a moment, then thanked him and shook it. He couldn't hold it against him. Eldridge couldn't possibly understand that running towards your fears to make them stop was just as cowardly as running away.

Polish Pete had finished sweeping, and was standing behind his chair. "You're next," he said.

"I think Mr. Eldridge is next. He got here before me."

Pete laughed. "Don't mind him. He had his haircut an hour ago and only stayed around to drink the coffee."

"And to talk with the voters," added Eldridge. "Don't forget that."

Jake looked down at the empty cup in his hand. He needed a reason,

any reason, for being there. Finally, he decided a partial truth was best.

"Actually, I came in looking for directions. Do you know if Julie Kaminsky is still living in town?"

"The Howard place, I think," said Eldridge. "Right, Pete?"

"Yeah. She moved there with her husband after Jinny left for Florida."

Eldridge jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and cocked his head. "It's down on Copeland Street. You know the one I mean?"

"Yeah, thanks." *Julie bought Ricky's house.* He wondered if a familiar setting would make this easier, or harder.

...

Copeland Street was only about a mile away, down Elm Street and across the Town River. By the time Jake reached the river, the clouds had thickened. The water looked gray, almost black, as he crossed the old stone bridge. The cows at Anderson's dairy farm were lying in the field, resting in preparation for the coming storm. The smell of manure burned his eyes.

He spent the short hike deep in thought. The fieldstone walls, the grove of white pines on the corner—it was all familiar, and should have been comforting. Instead, he found himself locating cover, looking for traps. The dream was coming fast, now, and he couldn't relax. Jake picked up his pace.

The house was a raised ranch with its garage on the left hand side. He could see the tire swing out back, twisting slowly beneath the old maple tree. The cedar shakes had been left a natural gray, framed by fresh white paint on the trim boards and shutters. The grass and shrubs were neatly trimmed. The mailbox still read "Howard."

Ricky still lives here, he realized. And there it was, the town's other police car, parked in the driveway. Jake forced himself up the steps, took a deep breath, and rang the bell.

Ricky Howard answered the door. He wore a dark blue police uniform and a frown that broke into a smile when he saw who was standing at his door. All the guilt came rushing back. *You don't deserve that smile,* Jake thought.

Ricky pushed the screen door opened and gave him a firm handshake. "What brings you to town?" he asked.

"Just stopping by on my way to Camp Edwards."

"Well, come on in. I'm on my lunch break." They walked together up the stairs. A petite woman, her long brown hair tied back, was standing over the kitchen stove.

"Jake, you remember my wife, Julie?"

Their eyes met for a brief moment—oh, those eyes! —and he watched her smile fade away.

"I made soup," she said. "Would you like some?"

"Yes, thanks."

Ricky pointed to a seat at their kitchen table. He pulled open the fridge and glanced inside.

"You want a can of tonic?"

Jake nodded, and Ricky passed him a Coke. Gas hissed from the top as he popped the pull tab, followed by a burble of foam. Julie set a bowl of soup in on the table, but didn't look up at him. She turned back to the stove and began to wipe it down with a sponge. Jake took a pull at the Coke. Ricky gave him a grin.

"So what's the news? Is the Army treating you okay?"

"I guess. They want to make me a sergeant."

"Big promotion. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Big raise, too?" Ricky asked.

Jake shrugged. "Not much." Sergeants were paid more, but he would have to leave Psi Corps and lose his bonus pay. Taken together, it would hardly be a raise at all. Certainly not enough to make him want to give orders, to be responsible for other men who would die if he failed, when he failed.

Jake picked up his spoon, and the two men ate in silence for a bit. He glanced over at Julie. Even in elastic-waist jeans her backside still looked good. Ricky noticed his gaze and turned towards his wife.

"You've been wiping that counter down for five minutes now. Why don't you come sit with us?"

Her reply was interrupted by a cry from the far end of the house.

"Excuse me, I have to go take care of the baby."

Julie dropped her sponge in the sink and rushed down the hall.

Ricky watched her depart. "Women. Married almost a year now, and I still can't figure her out."

Jake grunted and looked down at his bowl. He was tired of talking, so he slurped up another spoonful of soup instead. The chicken broth was soured by the taste of melancholy and opportunities lost.

Ricky's watch beeped, breaking the silence. He rose from his chair.

"I hate to be rude, Jake, but that alarm means I need to get back on the road. The department won't let me keep taking lunch at home if I push it."

"I understand."

"You go ahead and finish your soup; Julie will see you out."

The door banged behind him as Ricky trotted out the door, leaving Jake alone with his thoughts. The hot soup lay heavily in his belly, and he set down the spoon. After a few minutes, Julie returned with the baby on her right hip. A few strands of hair fell across her face as she leaned against the doorway. Jake forced a smile.

"Good looking kid," he said.

"Thank you."

The baby was staring at him.

"She has her mother's eyes."

Julie raised her head and pushed her hair back.

"She has her father's chin."

Now they were both staring at him. Jake couldn't speak.

"Don't worry. Ricky doesn't know."

He had been rehearsing his reply for days. How he hadn't known that the army would deploy him so soon after Phase V training. How he hadn't meant to leave without telling her. Now the words were stuck in his gut, churning with the soup and coffee and Coke, with the meds that gave him dreams he could never escape. He struggled to bring them out, but nothing came.

"He won't ever know it was you, Jake. Ricky deserves better than that. After you left me, after I got sick and had to miss graduation, after my parents kicked me out of the house, he took me in."

Jake swallowed hard. Julie waved her left hand.

"He saved for months to buy me this ring, this tiny little stone that says more than the Hope Diamond ever could. He married me before we ever slept together. And he's a good father to Megan and a good husband to me."

"So that's it?" It was a dumb question, but it was all he had. He had no defense for this assault, no weapon to fight back. Julie continued.

"It's over between us, Jake. Maybe I loved you when I was younger, but I had to grow up a lot in the last two years. There's no room for you in my life any more."

Jake rose from his chair. "I guess I should leave."

"Yeah, I guess you should."

Jake grabbed his duffel and walked out the front door. He paused on the steps, watching the white pines sway in the distance. The screen door squeaked closed behind him, and he felt the familiar déjà vu of a dream gone past.

It had started to rain, and he shivered. Still, it was just as well. The rain would hide his tears, and now he wouldn't have to accept that promotion to sergeant.

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About the Author

David G. Turner is a professional computer geek and hopeful romantic with the unexpected good sense to have married the right woman on the first try. Twenty-plus years later, they still live in upstate New York with their two daughters and far too many electronic devices. From time to time, he returns home to Massachusetts, where nobody asks him to predict the future.

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The Fixer

by Jack Skelter

Mortar walls. Thick and grey. Chipped by the nails of countless soldiers. Lieutenant Reggie "Hatch" Gomez, USN, stared at them until his eyes swam.

His cell was eight foot by six, deep inside the Hanoi Hilton. Shivering despite the heat, he sat on a mess of straw with his back to the wall, nursing his swollen jaw.

Lousy gooks. That hurt.

Footsteps trod down the corridor. With a metallic clang, a scrawny brown hand shoved a bowl of rice gruel through a slot in Gomez's door.

"An va chet, My can ba!"

Ignoring the bowl, Gomez closed his eyes; for a moment, he was back in the cockpit of his A-4 Skyhawk, laden with bombs for a tactical strike.

He and his wingman were screaming over Haiphong, line astern and wings held level for the run. Suddenly, a plume of white smoke punched out of the jungle below, arcing towards their Skyhawks.

"SAM, SAM, SAM! Break left, Dog Two!"

Gut twisting from the G's, Gomez pulled back on his flight stick and jammed his left foot hard on the ailerons. Confused, the missile swerved, and then—ignoring his wingman—barreled straight towards Gomez's plane.

Dammit—okay, stay cool—bank left—and then punch the chaff.

He banked hard, and then jabbed the button, expecting the radar-reflective strips of tinfoil to come gushing from his airplane's belly. Instead, from the dashboard there came a plaintive chirp—*chaff's not working!*—and the next thing he knew, Gomez was tumbling in the air, strapped to his seat,

ejection handle dangling from his hands.

Tough luck, Hatch—this is it—downed by a gremlin in your bird!

Gritting his teeth, Gomez rubbed his eyes and returned to his dingy cell—and jumped back when he saw one in the flesh, grinning sheepishly by his feet.

...

The critter had stubbly green skin, and held its long rabbit-like ears low on its monkeyish head. It skittered back when Gomez swore and flung the rice bowl straight at it.

"What the blazes are you?" The naval pilot's voice shook. "How in the heck did you get here?"

The gremlin wiped the gruel from its face and sucked its tiny fingers, purring softly as it did. Then, with arms outstretched, it pranced around the grimy floor while making whistling noises with its lips.

"You were aboard my plane—my Skyhawk?"

The creature nodded, and then, with another sheepish grin, mimed a pilot with a flight stick in hand, desperately punching a button on a dashboard.

"You!" Gomez sat up and crouched. "*You* screwed up my avionics!" He raised his hands like claws. "Why, I ought to wring your filthy little neck and—"

At that moment, Gomez's peephole clanged open. A pair of angry black eyes scanned the confines of the cell.

"Co gi? Giu im lang!"

Gomez stayed still until the eyes withdrew. The peephole clanged shut, and the guard's footsteps faded steadily away.

Gomez stared hard at the creature. "So, you can't be seen—not unless you want to."

The gremlin nodded, and then, from a fold in its skin, pulled out a crumpled Hershey bar wrapper and laid it awkwardly before Gomez's feet.

The pilot frowned. "You're the one stealing all that candy from my flight locker?" After another nod from the gremlin, Gomez rubbed his head. "All along, I thought it was our flight officer—I guess I owe him an apology."

The gremlin shrugged. Loping over to the upturned bowl, it sniffed it twice and then licked up the gruel congealing on the floor.

"Hungry, aren't we?" Gomez raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you just pinch food from the kitchen or something—you *can* make yourself invisible, right?"

With a low rumble, the green critter lifted its head and turned away from the bowl, repeatedly smacking the edge of one hand against the other as though dicing a carrot on a chopping board. Then, crouching on all fours, it mimed a tabby cat, hissing and clawing the air.

"The cook has a cat that can suss you out? Tough luck, little fella!"

As the gremlin snuffled and hung its head, Gomez closed his eyes and rubbed them hard. When he opened them again, sure enough, the little green

critter was there, near the rice bowl, purring softly as it lapped up the gruel.

"You're the real deal, aren't you, little guy?"

Rubbing his jaw, Gomez sat back, and then, with a sharp grunt, just as suddenly sat up.

"Hey, can you understand those gooks—I mean, Vietnamese?"

Licking its lips, the gremlin eyed Gomez and nodded.

"And you can get into most places—except the kitchen, of course?"

The gremlin shrugged, then nodded again.

"Good. You got me into this mess, and now you're gonna help me and my buddies get out. Understand?"

The gremlin hesitated, wringing its little hands. But after looking at the crumpled wrapper lying next to Gomez's bandaged feet, it crept closer towards the pilot and plopped down beside him.

"Listen, little guy," Gomez said, nudging the candy wrapper with his toe. "If you wanna get your mitts on a nice and shiny Skyhawk again—and I *know* you do—here's the deal: you scratch my back, and I scratch yours—especially once we're back on Uncle Sam's bird farm. All the Hershey bars you can eat—savvy?"

After rubbing its hands and chattering to itself for a while, the gremlin bobbed its ungainly head.

"Great, Mr. Fixit." Gomez grinned, sat up straighter, and cracked his sore knuckles. "Here's what I want you to do."

...

By rights, Mr. Fixit (the name had stuck) deserved hazard pay, for all the scurrying and scampering he did around the prison. Each day, at dinnertime, after the customary beating of the Americans, he and Gomez held a tete-à-tete, sometimes lasting for hours, what with the gremlin's inability to speak or write. But he was a cunning little critter, quick to learn, and quicker still at picking things up.

"No, no, Mr. Fixit," Gomez said, ignoring the pangs in his stomach. "Put that distributor cap back—no point in ticking Captain Bucktooth off—not yet."

One day, as the monsoon season slackened, Gomez thought that all the bowls of rice gruel that he gave up and fed to Mr. Fixit finally paid off.

"We're being transferred," Gomez said softly, looking at the small typed document that Mr. Fixit had filched. "Don't need to read much gook to see that—this here's Hanoi, there's Da Nang, those are military vehicle specs, and these are all names: good old American names."

Gomez gave back the paper to the gremlin, who was by now hopping from foot to foot. From a secret pocket in the lining of his striped pajamas, the pilot fished out a scrap of dried fish, which he had been saving over the past couple of months.

"Here you go, little fella." Gomez stroked the tips of the gremlin's ears as he scarfed down the tidbit. "Return that paper to Captain Bucktooth's

office, then go get some rest—it'll be a long day tomorrow."

After Mr. Fixit rubbed his belly and left, Gomez sat down on the far side of one wall, and began tapping patiently on its cold, hard surface.

...

Captain Muoc Tra Nang—or, less respectfully, Captain Bucktooth—was in a black, foul mood. From the moment he mustered his prison guards, up to the time he marshaled the American fliers to the half-tracks, it was one never-ending logistical nightmare: the vehicles' engines refused to turn over, and their air compressors kept buckling down—much to the chagrin of his mechanics. And when they were finally able to get them started, their gun turrets began acting up, traversing their mountings as though manned by ghosts. Worse, as the half-tracks slogged through a fortified village, one of the guns let out a brief inexplicable burst, killing several chickens and wounding a cow.

And now the half-tracks had bogged down again, quite mysteriously, stranding them all in a remote stretch of road only thirty kilometers from the demilitarized zone. To make matters worse, all their radios were malfunctioning, and some soldiers were complaining that the bolts in their rifles had jammed.

"All right—take the prisoners out of the half-tracks." Captain Tra Nang's left eyeball twitched time and again in a nervous tic. "We'll *march* these capitalist bastards to Qu Throi. Bind their wrists and hobble their feet. If anyone resists or tries to escape—shoot him!"

Harangued by the guards, the Americans lined up behind one of the half-tracks, flicking their eyes around. One of them got beaten down and kicked for opening his mouth, causing some of the guards to laugh.

Captain Tra Nang laughed, too—the sight of bleeding Americans amused him no end. Wiping his eyes, he was starting to relax when several gun turrets in the half-tracks swiveled towards his troops.

Bap-bap-bap-bap-bap. Bap-bap-bap-bap.

Squeezing for cover beneath a half-track, the NVA captain gasped as a strange monkeyish face with rabbit's ears popped up in front of his nose.

"What in the world—"

The half-track coughed to life and nosed its way forward. As one of its wheels approached a screaming Tra Nang, the monkeyish face grinned and dissolved in the humid air.

...

The chopper pilot looked back at the POWs huddled inside the Huey. One of them inched up and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm Lieutenant Gomez, Navy flier. Thanks for saving us."

The pilot held up a thumb. "No problem, man. It's a miracle, how you escaped."

"By the skin of our teeth. But I tell you, after Hanoi, slogging through thirty klicks of swampland seemed heavenly."

"Roger that."

As the Huey flitted over the treetops, the pilot checked his gauges and clucked his tongue.

"We're losing hydraulic pressure in the portside stabilizer," he said to his copilot.

"Running diagnostics." The copilot swore. "I just checked the damn thing this morning."

Gomez leaned closer to the two chopper pilots and smiled.

"Don't worry," he said, glancing at the green gremlin grinning beneath the instrument panel. "I know a friend who can fix that, real quick."

###

About the Author

Jack Skelter is a barrister and solicitor based in Auckland, New Zealand. His short fiction has appeared in various publications, including *Murky Depths* (Best Magazine/Periodical, British Fantasy Awards 2010), *Midnight Echo, Bards & Sages Quarterly, Comets & Criminals, and Liquid Imagination*. He was, at various stages in his life, the managing editor of a university newspaper, a part-time magazine writer, and a frantic lead guitarist before being sidetracked into law. He is now an easygoing bass player with a gorgeous wife, two pretty daughters, and a ghostly white cat.

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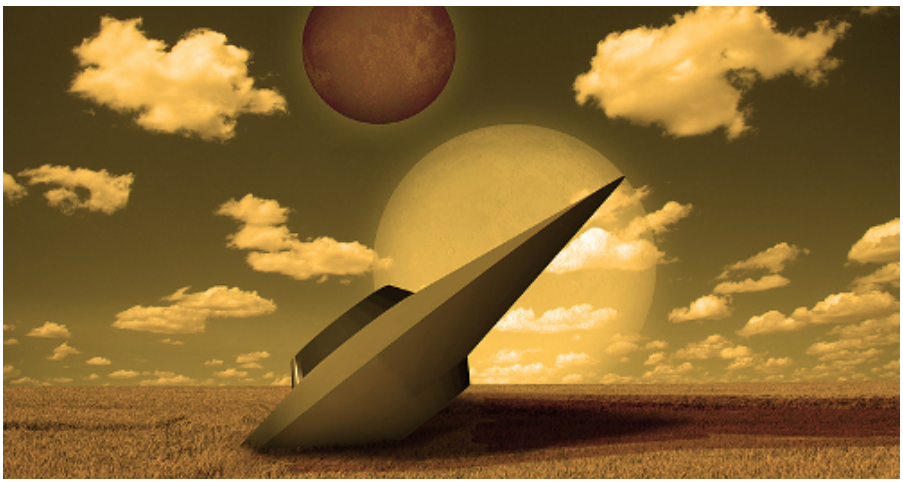

A Childproof War

by Lon Prater

Galvan Furth, the oldest at thirteen, dreaded the bone-jarring stop at the end of *Scamp's* sickening fall. Not because the landing would be hard—it would be—but because impact would begin the next round of kill or be killed.

Like her three sister units, *Scamp* plummeted toward the moonlit Dredil countryside on wings of landing jet flame. A glance out the panscreen told Galvan that *Rascal*, *Bully*, and *Spoilsport's* landing jets had also been lit off.

Jay Tinnea, *Scamp's* jolly propulsion guru, also thirteen, cracked wise over the internal circuit. "Ground floor, coming up fast!"

Suva Ricci, the youngest at eleven-years-old, broke in from her post in the Targeting ad Sensors Center. "I need to be sick," she groaned. But her warchip wouldn't let that happen; not at a time like this.

Pace remained characteristically silent. With his spooky reserve and fishlike stare, the bony weapons specialist was probably busy thinking up morbid things to paint on the ordnance.

The fall made Galvan's innards rise into his throat. He pulled the protective plastic from his mouth. "Put your guards back in and activate your impact gel. Thirty seconds remaining," he directed.

He shoved his own mouthguard back in and bit down, thumbing the switch to activate the command chair's impact gel. Low power current reacted with the impact gel, inflating two cushions around him like an enormous pair of red-painted lips.

The warchip behind his left eye responded by relaxing his entire body. His muscles suddenly felt as if they were made from loose rubber bands.

The chip did nothing to obstruct the thrill of fear that gripped him; it just prevented any automatic responses that might endanger him during freefall. The Elder had always been thoughtful in that way.

He counted down the seconds, knowing the jolt would come before he wanted it to. With three seconds left on his silent countdown, the six ton Hover-Capable Assault Craft collided with the planet, compacting the soil beneath its monstrous girth.

The impact cushions deflated and shriveled back into their container. Outside, the landing jet modules separated from the hull with a hiss and a pop. Galvan spat out his mouthguard.

"Status?" he asked, flicking several switches at once.

"Propulsion and Power Routers are good to go, main hover field generator is lit off. Number two in standby," J.T. said.

"Roger that."

Pace's terse report next. "Weapons up."

Galvan cut his acknowledgment short. "Rog."

After Suva gave a verbal thumbs up for Targeting and Sensors, he

passed the report to Scofield Ray, *Rascal's* captain and the leader of Fun Squad.

Nodding to himself, Galvan began checking the digital readouts and status lights, watching as everything came up green.

Once satisfied, the young H-CAC pilot pulled back the hoverprop throttle and felt the enormous war machine rise from the ground.

Down below, J.T. crowed. "Gotta love that feeling!"

Galvan had to admit, *Scamp* was an impressive piece of gear. Big as a landwhale but ten times faster and more lethal, H-CACs represented the latest combat technology stolen from the other side. Each unit packed an impressive suite of energy, rocket, and projectile weapons, all either mounted on the rotating quad turret or integral to the hull. Every month, the Elder's nanoconstructors delivered more of the versatile craft to the war effort.

Good thing, since it seemed the jerks who had unleashed the Early Death upon humanity were always a step ahead of whatever offensive the Elder ordered. He hoped this mission, obliterating an enemy research building, would be different.

As an H-CAC commander, Galvan Furth was privy to more of the Elder's strategic planning matrix than the others, but even his sketchy access wasn't enough to give him any idea how the overall campaign was going. He'd participated in three missions, an ambush and two raids. He had yet to see the enemy, only the burning hulks of their painted war craft far away on the battlefield.

The first time he had seen the enemy hovertanks, Galvan thought them friendlies; the designs were that similar. The other side’s model ran a bit more compact. Squatter and faster like mean, short-legged dogs. Their weapons weren't as accurate, but they packed more wallop when they did hit.

When the old people had discovered the enemy’s Early Death virus, and how it killed anyone who ventured too far into puberty, they'd developed the quantum intelligence known as the Elder and charged it with one simple order: Preserve humanity until the species could once again mature.

The war had been going on for longer than anyone living could guess. At thirteen, Galvan had been out of the birthing tubes for quite awhile. Like everyone else so close to puberty, he had been sent to the front lines to spend his last days fighting the enemy; one Early Death or another would claim him.

He was smart; he paid attention to what happened around him. He knew he was more likely to sprout horns and feathers than he was to ever return home. If fighting meant he died a little sooner, fine. Great. Just so long as his name ended up high on the scorelist at the end.

Galvan took up a position well off *Rascal's* eight o'clock, and watched his panscreen. The overlay of Suva's radar display showed *Bully* and *Spoilsport* falling into their respective positions at either end of the uneven arrowhead formation.

Scofield Ray gave the signal, and Fun Squad set off through the

darkened Dredil countryside. Amidst the tallstalks lurked rusting war machines that had to be navigated around like abandoned toys on the playroom floor.

...

Galvan was still piloting hours later. First light had almost come when J.T's bucktoothed grin poked through the access scuttle into the constricted command chamber. "Brought you some rats, buddy."

Galvan stretched, ignoring the popping noises that cascaded through his lanky frame. "Thanks, pal," he said, grabbing the warm plastic container and glancing back at his screens and dials. The warchip wouldn't allow his attention to stray for long while the craft kept moving.

An H-CAC commander's chip was said to be the most demanding, and Galvan believed it. He hadn't slept yet. The warchip periodically caused his glands to release fresh adrenalin into his system. He felt jittery and washed out. If he did not rest soon, his reactions would begin to show it. The warchip could only push him so far.

J.T. pushed both arms through the narrow scuttle and parked there, half on the ladder and half in the command cockpit. "Any word from the powers that be?"

"Not a peep," Galvan answered, rubbing his eyes. "Don't expect to hear anything, either. Only short and narrow signals are authorized in the op plan. Farthest away we'll hear from is *Spoilsport* until the objective is taken out."

The propulsion tech put his meaty lips together. J.T. fancied that puberty was setting in already; he swore every downy hair on his face was the beginning of a beard. He sometimes joked that he hoped it would fill in before Early Death caught up to him. His bright eyes became flat and serious. "You don't think they're true, do you?"

Galvan knew what he meant, but asked anyway. "Think what're true?"

"The rumors. The ones about the enemy..." He let his voice trail off.

"You mean they’re winning?" Galvan's voice deepened. He looked at J.T. for a split second, then the warchip forced his eyes back to the panel.

"Yeah. Those rumors," J.T. whispered. The beefy propulsion specialist cast his eyes over the panscreen, though from his low angle the plain appeared distorted and color-warped. He automatically scanned the relevant cockpit status lights, feeding his chip fresh data on Propulsion and Power status.

Galvan’s eyes swept the 360 degree panscreen display. Dense tallstalks carpeted Dredil's central plains: crossing on foot would have been impossible.

The tallstalks had been left bent and crimped in the hovertank's wake. In a day or so, the quick growing plant would show no sign of their passage. Or almost no sign. As they watched, *Rascal* passed between the separated hull and ruined quadturret of a scorched H-CAC carcass.

Galvan swallowed something from the rations box without tasting it. "I'm not sure. Those rumors have been around since we were just old people sperm and eggs on the Elder's shelf. I mean, all this fighting, we gotta be making ground, right?"

"I suppose." A pause, while J.T. reinspected the status panels for the hoverfield generator and the internal power grid.

Then: "What do you think is taking so long to find a cure?"

Galvan sighed. He nearly said maybe the Early Death has spread too much to control, or maybe the Elder wasn't smart enough after all, or maybe there just wasn't a cure. His answer was forestalled by the directional communications beam from Scof, relaying the tactical signal for a six-hour bivouac in current formation.

Galvan shrugged instead, making an "orders are orders" face, and set the H-CAC down, crushing a clearing for itself among the tallstalks. He folded his command chair back into a serviceable sleeper. Yawning, he set the half-eaten box of rations on the deck.

J.T. took the hint gracefully, flashing an easy grin. "I got maintenance to do on the coil advancers anyway. Have a good nap, skipper," he said, stuffing his upper body back down the access ladder.

...

Nightfall found the four H-CACs well past the tallstalks, arced a kilo or more apart from each other across the lightly forested hill country. The enemy's research base brooded on the horizon ten kilos away. A great metal graveyard of vacant and damaged war machines lay between Fun Squad and their objective.

The plan was for *Spoilsport* to charge past the facility at 2000 hours, flushing out any hidden defenders, while *Bully* and *Rascal* closed in and engaged anything moving. *Scamp* was to stand off and obliterate the objective, using the extra loadout of Long Range Guided Missiles and Fracas shells until there was nothing standing.

That was the plan, and it seemed like a good one, all the way up until 1950, when they started taking fire.

"Ambush!" Scof's voice cracked over the radio. He screamed orders no one could make out. Before anyone could pass a "Say again," his signal cut off. Galvan swung the *Scamp* into a high-speed evasive maneuver even as the hull reverberated with a nearby explosion.

Suva, sounding even younger than usual, choked a report out over the internal comm speaker. Her strained tones betrayed loss and imminent peril; emotions her warchip would not let her body respond to at the moment. "*Rascal* isn't moving or emitting, Galvan. I show six—no, eight—eight hostiles scattered two miles on our rear, holding their position. Their targeting radars are all over us!"

Galvan maneuvered by chip-enhanced instinct, checking the radar display, grunting at all the enemy contacts. Heeling the hovercraft left, he

craned his head to the right, and maxed out the magnification on his panscreen.

No need to amplify the viewer: the flames engulfing Scof's H-CAC provided enough ambient light to show there could be no survivors. It didn't look like there would even be bodies.

That left Galvan in charge.

He pushed the narrowband send key and ordered *Spoilsport* and *Bully* to break off east and west, engaging the targets closest to them.

"Suva, Pace, find a target and open fire! We're coming right oblique."

Neither responded, but Galvan heard the quad turret humming and spinning around outside the command center's reinforced shell. Then the whoosh of twinned missiles emptying from their insulated carriages.

Mayhem developed all around him. The projectile cannon belched smoke and spit flame, sending shells screaming into the night sky.

Under it all, the clatter of Pace at work, whistling cheerily as he alternated slamming shells into the loading tray and then replacing the missiles as Suva launched them. Galvan could hear every slap of Pace's white hand on the ordnance.

In the next second Suva's whoop carried across the speaker. "Two bad guys down by radar. The one Pace nailed with the Frac shells isn't moving, but its fire control radar is still active."

Another burp from the turret.

Pace, deadpan: "Still active?"

"Negative," Suva responded, distracted. Galvan saw her in his mind's eye, the waif's fragile hands blurring over the Targeting and Sensor pads. Suva's warchip allowed her to track all the vectoring munitions and units in the battlespace, updating their status a dozen times per second.

Galvan jerked the great craft from left to right, changing speeds. No need to be an easy target. To his left a bright lance of white light from *Bully* devastated an incoming missile. The air so thick with dust and smoke and offensive firepower that Galvan thought he could almost smell it, even inside the airtight H-CAC.

All around *Scamp*, soil geysered into the air. "J.T., I need you to siphon off eight percent from propulsion power and route it to boost the shields and the defense laser."

"Got it."

Suva reported that *Spoilsport* was limping along at forty percent speed but still firing strong. *Bully* was retreating fast and no longer sending automated status updates to the combined unit display.

Galvan continued to slew the H-CAC, noting its sluggishness. He was rethinking the decision to boost shields and the def-laser when his stomach went wild. A Gossi burst had just been deflected.

"I got fires down here!" J.T. yelled into his mic. "Gotta shut down the aux gennie while I redirect power."

"Crap!" Galvan's hands and feet wove the huge hovercraft through the fire and noise-filled night. This time the smoke was real.

Until the aux generator came back up, his ability to make accelerated turns was diminished. So was the rear shield. He slammed the control levers in opposite directions, twisting *Scamp* to put her stronger forward shield and armor toward the closest threat on the radar.

He could see from the joint tactical overlay that *Spoilsport's* Targeting & Sensors guy—what was his name? Chan something—had labeled another kill.

Bully's kill data input had frozen when they ate whatever the distant enemy had fed them. He watched the flame trail from a volley of rockets spiral away from the wounded H-CAC. Good to know that prim and pony-tailed Bernadette Comfort and the rest of *Bully's* crew fought on.

"I need power rerouted—like yesterday, J.T.!"

Scamp rocked with the force of an internal explosion. The air vent over the command chair stopped blowing fresh air. The suction labored to drag smoke from the cockpit.

Pace's voice came across the speaker, cemetery cool. "He's gone, Galvan. Fire got to the spare arming fuses. He was right over them." The hiss of firefighting agents being released followed his voice through the speaker.

Galvan wanted to deny it, block the information. Cover his ears and eyes. The warchip programming kept him from doing so. The charge on the power grid fell to nearly zero as the routers popped themselves offline.

They would die if they stayed inside *Scamp's* hull.

H-CACs had no self-destruct. The enemy already had this technology: there would be no purpose. Yet there was something he could do.

But first, as captain he'd need to report battle status to the Elder. Galvan toggled the switch to upload *Scamp's* tactical history cache by narrowbeam to the dropship. The dropship would satellite-relay it Home.

"Pace, arm one of your unmounted missiles for six—no—four minute delay, then get out through the aft hatch. Suva, assign as many targets as you can to the missiles left in the carriage. I'll meet you on the hull."

Pace rogered up, but no response from Suva. Galvan pointed the H-CAC at the nearest moving enemy. As he watched, *Spoilsport* took a devastating broadside hit from one of the four remaining radar blips.

Bully creaked along, her shields no longer effective and her def-laser hanging like a broken wing from one corner of the quadturret. A shell from her projectile cannon found its distant target, but didn't appear to do any damage.

Galvan jammed the rations box against the throttle, maxing it out. He tried to ignore the memory of J.T.'s grinning, downy mug as he slid from *Scamp's* cockpit for the last time.

Barreling through the tight metal tunnel of arcing wires, he saw Suva slumped over her console in a blue haze of ozone rich smoke. Galvan glanced

at her panel, glad to see a flashing list of prioritized targets assigned to each weapon. He hoped the autofire would have enough power to get some shots off.

Hauling her over one shoulder, he carried her to the open aft hatch. Pace reached one blood-smeared arm in and helped pull Suva's inert body onto the hull. Galvan jerked himself up into the night with both hands.

Without light amplification it proved impossible to see more than a few feet in the smoke filled blackness. Here and there little pockets of flame paid small tribute to the ted H-CAC carcasses and their departed crews.

"Head for a fire," Galvan shouted, the wind whipping Suva's hair into his face. "The heat will hide your IR signature."

Pace nodded and rolled off the moving hovercraft. Galvan lost sight of him immediately. He grappled Suva into a fireman's carry, surprised at how little she weighed.

He held his breath. The H-CAC had slowed to thirty-percent speed. Better jump while the jumping's good.

Galvan leapt, losing both Suva and his wind the instant he hit the ground. The acrid wafting smoke taunted and choked him, playing “keep away” with the fresh air. He staggered through the noisy, moonless night to Suva's crumpled form. Pace was nowhere to be seen.

Through the haze and his own irritated tears he could see *Scamp's* silhouette, somehow still in motion. One last hopeless missile fired into the air.

Scamp erupted then, became a ball of flame that kept exploding anew as the remaining munitions cooked off. She hadn’t made it anywhere near the enemy.

Bully, the last of Fun Squad, grounded; the hovertank’s generators no longer able to keep the H-CAC in motion. Her quadturret gyrated out of control.

Three shells and a Gossi burst found Bernadette Comfort's H-CAC at the same time, the broken def-laser's stump taking one of the shells directly.

Galvan bent to attend to Suva. Not breathing. He began pumping her chest and blowing into her mouth, keeping her nose pinched. Smoke stung his eyes. Where was Pace?

A part of him became aware of the enemy's surviving war machines slipping off into the distance.

Breathe.

So much death and for what?

Breathe.

They had never even seen the enemy.

Breathe.

The enemy had never seen them.

Breathe.

Just metal lumps on a screen to each other. Targets.

Breathe. Breathe.

...

Galvan didn't want to give up on Suva Ricci, but at some point exhaustion overcame him. He awoke past noon to find his head resting on her dead chest.

"We'd all be dead if not for that fire."

Galvan started, looking up to see Pace's hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. He looked even more corpselike and ghoulish than usual, caked with spatters of dried blood. He seemed unhurt; the blood was probably J.T.'s.

Galvan had to work to make his throat produce any sound at all. "It was the only reason the chips would let us bail out."

He looked down at their fallen crewmate's spare cold frame, then at the wreckage of *Scamp.* A metal coffin to hold his friends' burnt remains forever after. "Help me get her back in there. With J.T."

Afterward, they stood near the devastated H-CAC, each lost in his own reverie as the sun began to drop, setting the west awash in red. For as far as they could see, the field lay in a ravaged mess of smoke and shadows, fires and torn metal. Wreckage both new and old.

In the distance, the enemy research facility's stark walls loomed large. One corner wore a blackened and crumbling scar as if it had weathered at least one attack in its time. Despair welled in Galvan's stomach as he contemplated the mission's failed and forgotten objective.

They set up camp where they could observe the enemy base without being seen, living off scavenged rations and edible greenery. Pace supplemented their meager diet by picking off wild game with a slingshot.

Three days passed.

Then three more.

Still no movement or activity at the facility. Not even a sentry. Galvan sat gnawing on a burrower's bone when they heard the hum of heavy equipment approaching from the plains beyond the battlefield.

Was it another squad, coming to finish what Fun Squad couldn't? From what Galvan could tell at this distance, they were actual H-CACs, not the enemy's squatter version. Friendlies. The hovertanks spread out and went to ground.

Preparing for an ambush.

Galvan remembered his first mission, a simple double-squad ambush. He tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach as he looked up at Pace.

The gaunt ten-year-old fish-stared back at him, something in his eyes too mature, too wise for a boy still a so far out from his Early Death.

"We can't win. We're fighting ourselves," Pace said.

Galvan hugged his knees to his chest, the realization too big—too painful—for spoken words. He thought of the dead. Squad after squad, kids from both sides; some his age, others younger. Directing death and fire at remote radar blips, distant tanks full of children not so different from

themselves.

Galvan looked at his pale comrade.

"What if there is no more Early Death?" he ventured. "What if the virus is gone and the only thing killing us is us? Then what?"

Pace's words rumbled out of him, sounding like they were not far ahead of tears. "The Elder thinks all this war is just another part of the humanity it's supposed to preserve."

Galvan could not bear to look at him. “We have to stop the war,” he said into the tense Dredil evening. "We have to find a way to fight the Elder. For J.T. and Suva, Bernadette, and Scof and all the others."

They waited there in the evening gloom, irrelevant warchips processing every input as if the two boys were still part of a hovercraft crew. At precisely 1950 the ambush played itself out again; this time with the sides reversed.

When the first missiles roared skyward, Galvan's warchip automatically dried his eyes. According to its programming, this was no time for blurred vision.

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About the Author

Lon Prater is a retired Navy officer by day, writer of odd little tales by night. His short fiction has appeared in the Stoker-winning anthology *Borderlands 5*, *Writers of the Future XXI*, and Origins Award finalist *Frontier Cthulhu*. He is an avid Texas Hold’em player, occasional stunt kite flyer, and connoisseur of history, theme parks, and haunted hayrides.

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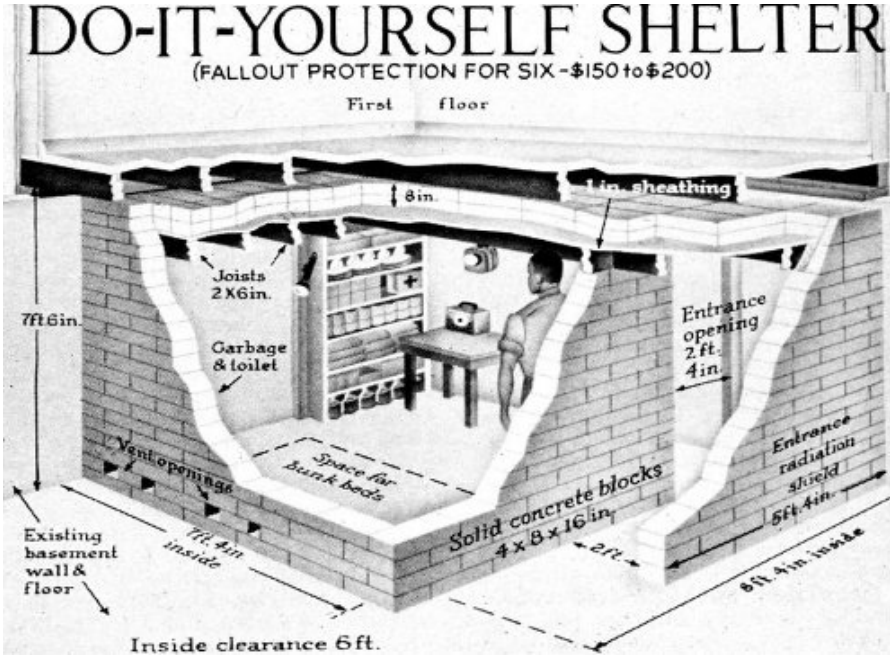

The Frontline Is Everywhere

by Michael Trudeau

I'm here with little more to do than attempt to drown out the delighted laughter of the women in my life, together with the low-pitched chuckle of a man, all of which come muffled through the wall from the adjacent room. The best I can do is read, though I was never a big reader, or play by myself little games of chance. I was never huge on music and did not think to bring my stereo or Discman. But whether playing these games or reading I am always thinking about the better days on the surface—what I thought were better days—trying to amplify my thoughts to the loudest decibel.

Like most men of the day, I began going around town in a gentleman's hat. I do not remember when I began doing this, and it was not a choice of the fashion conscious. I simply fell into the habit. I did not understand that the hat granted me a sense of shelter. A way to shield death from above. And that even this flimsiest of means could be, oddly, greatly reassuring. But it was only a sense. I've come to understand that now, to see how silly we could all be, and so now when I shuffle from room to room I go with a bare scalp.

But thanks to the hat, or no thanks to it, I was able to walk about town relatively carefree for a long time. The ability coincided with a media onslaught of canned goods, when the Campbells and Heinzes marketed to our fears, and soon ads began to depict husbands and wives hunched over in their bomb shelters under cover of darkness—smiles implacable—and with canopeners opening pickled meats and relishes. During this time there was

also my neighbor Jim Conlon, who by some reckonings is a better man than me, and who even then, I assume, had been doing it with my wife for quite a while.

...

Picture if you will a mid-September morn. It's bright. The first leaves of autumn had just fallen and I'm out in the backyard with rake in hand when I see Jim Conlon standing there, in *his* backyard, alongside an enormous cardboard box, eight feet by ten. He's scratching his head and examining a set of blueprints. I rake on over, and on closer inspection I see that he's purchased one of those do-it-yourself bomb shelters.

The first bomb that got dropped, if memory serves, fell on a little park in our town square, a place you could always find a slew of bums sleeping day or night. The bomb had left a big crater half earth half concrete where a grassiness had once intersected a blacktop. From my daily walk I knew the faces of a handful of bums, and sitting in my office a few days after the bombing I realized that I hadn't seen a single bum since before the bombing. No fatalities had been reported, but I wondered:

Could it be that they were killed?

On my way home I went to the crater to affirm my suspicion that the handful of bums had gotten blown away. My pace slowed as I neared that precipitous brink and, a bit bad with heights, I got on all fours. As I centimetered up to peer inside my chin sent a rain of pebbles over the crater's edge. I peered down.

Part of me was prepared for a gruesome sight—dried and caked blood, roped entrails, swollen remains, I'm not really sure. But to my relief lay several bums congregated in its rubble, all very much alive on closer inspection, in repose.

Relief. The bombing couldn't stop the bums from bumming.

Along the crater's perimeter there spiraled downward a narrow walkway, a ramp more or less, whether naturally occurring or carved by the bums for their passage I could not tell. Overall the crater seemed better than most places to hang out if you were a bum. It was autumn after all, and the bitter winds would blow mostly right over the crater, never reaching down in there to chill your rough bum skin. In short, they seemed better off.

I summoned the courage to wave to them. "Hi, you-all," I called. Even to my ears the words didn't sound natural. I wasn't Southern, so I could not drawl, and I had a great fear of sounding like a white dork. The bums looked up and one of them, confused, hesitantly waved back. I recognized none of the faces. And this was a bit discouraging, for it meant surely a bum or two, or possibly three, had gotten blown up. I felt an affinity for those unfortunates, for all unfortunates in fact, but for those especially. They resided in our town square after all, and I felt it was my duty. But by and large I left the crater with a feeling of reassurance. Inhaling that strange autumn scent of leaves freshly dead I continued toward home, taking pleasure as I went about

in the bright sights and sounds of what would be one of my last autumn days.

...

Occasionally you'd read of completely pointless happenings in the *Community Ledger* such as a bomb that had fallen in a field near the freeway onramp and exploded, doing little to no damage whatsoever. A similar story, a town favorite, describes a whole family who awakens at 2 a.m. to the sound of a large crash. Groggy-eyed, the family converges on the upstairs landing in the dark. They are pajamaed head to toe. They shrug, Dad flips on the lights. He makes loud clomping sounds with his feet to signal his approach, his family picks up on this tactic and follows suit, and Dad leads the way with a Louisville Slugger. Like a line of elephants they hold tight each other's drop bottoms, and together the family charges downstairs single file to investigate the commotion. Sure enough there's a gaping hole in the ceiling of their TV room (or *den*), and a 2,000-pounder is sitting there on the sofa. It's a Fat Man, World War II era—minus that unnamable warhead, thank God—with its teeny propeller in the stabilizer fins still spinning away. Front-page picture of Mom and Dad and the kids (smiles implacable) standing around the bomb, egg-shaped and black-as-a-blackhole black. The sofa holding the bomb is either a dirty light green or aquamarine or blue. Its legs are flattened underneath, but other than that it appears fully functional.

In an addendum the paper regretted that the mother and two of the children got smashed up in a car accident the day after the bombing. The editor was unable to log the update before the paper went to press (was in to work late that morning for whatever reason), unfortunately. If readers wished to send donations for the roof or funeral arrangements, they could do so through the local Rotary-Lions-Elks.

Needless to say, the story filled me with outrage and deep sadness. I remember standing up from the toilet abruptly. I took the paper to my wife, whose name is Betty, and over yogurt and granola and coffee we wrote out a check together. Actually we decided on two checks, one from my account and one from Betty's, with the foresight that it would be easier for the father to deal with two checks than to divide the funds by splitting one larger check in half—and this saved Betty the burden of having to write another check to myself, or saved me the burden of having to write another check to Betty, or saved either of us a trip to the bank to pay the other person back in cash.

...

Back to that mid-September morn in the backyard. First, I finish the raking, careful to keep my back to Jim Conlon to avoid unpleasant small talk. I could fit all the bagfuls of leaves into the backseat of the Subaru and drop them off at the compost heap, but I'm tired and I put it off. Instead I line them up against the house. Maybe next week. Inside I find my wife, whose name is Betty, sitting in the sofa chair reading one of her urban home-living magazines. She's getting shorter and more rotund like her old man, details that fill me with sorrow for the millionth time.

I tell her about Jim Conlon and his bomb shelter.

She doesn't look up from her magazine but offers the usual mm hmm.

I continue about Jim Conlon and his new bomb shelter, because I know she isn't listening and she is trying to read. In the kitchen I lay out a cutting board and all the necessary items for sandwich making.

Our kitchen is nice. It opens up into our dining room, which in turn opens up into the living room in which my wife Betty sits in her sofa chair beside her lamp reading her magazine. We have a lot of counter space; Betty and I redid the countertops in the mid-'80s, and I choose to lay out the cutting board and the necessary materials for sandwich making in a location from which I can gauge Betty's face while talking at her and preparing a delicious sandwich.

I slice some cucumber and tomato and avocado and a thin piece of real Danish havarti—the times allowed me to be finicky when it came to my cheeses. My Jim Conlon–bomb shelter anecdote has come to an end and I realize sadly I've nothing else with which to antagonize Betty. I finish assembling my sandwich and take a bite.

A new thought occurs to me. "What was that, dear?" I ask my wife, through a mouthful of sandwich.

"Hmm?" she says.

"What's that you said just now, dear?" I repeat. I could endlessly tap this strategy, and I am content.

She looks up finally, her face as always an X ray of her vapid mind. "Oh, nothing, never mind," she says, unaware that she hadn't spoken in the first place.

I smile, and she goes back to her magazine.

...

It was decided that the opposing parties would stage a conventional war, which means a non-nuclear war. It was a great relief. The diplomats and partisans and everyday citizens smiled and shook hands about this, for everyone was satisfied with the rational, effective accords of the policymakers all around. "Let's be reasonable about this," they'd said, more or less. And they finally had been. The people applauded. A conventional war it would be.

Though I must admit I was skeptical from the beginning. Because I for one would prefer, if I were to be taken out, that everyone else go with me. (Under the simple logic that if I am no more, then man shall be no more.) With the exception of my daughter, of course. And there was something a little reassuring about every molecule of your being being reduced to ash—the ash then vaporized, the vaporized ash split and repslit infinitely, the fire responsible for the vaporization itself consumed by fire, in turn consumed by fire, reducing fire to nothing, et cetera, and all this occurring *instantly*—as opposed to being blown apart into portable chunks. Here's an arm, there's a calf, unbeknownst that you're dead, maybe your heart's still pumping blood. Not for me.

But we had our war of reason, of discretion, of the common good for both sides, et cetera. This conclusion did do well to allay everyone's dread of nuclear annihilation. And it was pleasing to see that old-fashioned resolve, of men mowing their lawns, kissing their wives on their way out the door, tipping an extra three percent at the café—men with their fears tucked away inside (although they all wore hats)—and pleasing to see the joy had by acquisition of new, worthwhile hobbies by men such as Jim Conlon, who saw hope in the future, and hope in the strength and determination of his hands and sound instruction-following in projects such as the shelter.

The poor man believed he had the power to save his family from death.

...

In the kitchen, I open the fridge and pour myself a glass of iced tea. Wow, it's the first leaf fall of the season and I'm still drinking iced tea! Funny how the seasons sometimes tend to last. Soon I will be switching to hot cider, though, and then, soon after the transition to hot cider, will come the transition to hot cocoa. And here, it occurs to me, here in the north of the United States, for the northern United States can get very cold, halfway through winter will come the transition from hot cocoa to cocoa with a spot of brandy. I'm delighted.

I turn to my wife, who seated in the sofa chair is reading her country home-living magazine. "Betty, dear," I say, "I believe Jim Conlon has now finished erecting his bomb shelter."

"Oh?" she says, looking not halfway up from her literature. It is wryly amusing that Betty has *partially* acknowledged my words simply because they impart the name Jim Conlon, with whom she had an affair two years ago and may or may not be humping to this day. I smile.

"That's right, Jim Conlon."

Now her eyes flicker up at me and she smiles a smile that conveys the joy we share for having shared and transcended the incidence of her having ridden Jim Conlon in our marriagebed, several times I presume, and me arriving home to find her as some say performing *fellatio* on him in that very sofa chair, and us being able to speak his name with no remnants of what is past and forgotten.

Just then the image I've created of their union invades me as it often does, and my humor goes limp. It's more or less the same every time. The two bodies in various positions in various rooms of my home. Catching sight of my smiling portrait bedside and pointing a cigar at it, for instance, Jim Conlon announces, "That Sam Horner is a f ing blank." Pause. "Put your hand like this and your mouth like this. That's it," he says, with a slight adjustment of my wife's jowls.

"And look at that f ing hairline," he continues, taking a pull from his cigar. He ashes in my wife Betty's jewelry dish on the endtable. Enraptured with bodily pleasure his thoughts are interrupted for a moment. But he soon

resumes contemplation of my visage or my round belly or my clothing: “You have to look at him all day, Betty. You’ve seen it, right? You must know what I’m saying. Namely, it’s so obvious he’s going *bald*. And really, the sad part here—it’s *so pathetically* obvious that he has no realization of it!” He snuffs out his cigar. “Let’s finish up.” To this Betty mumbles affirmation, and her mouth continues to its end.

All the while my smiling portrait looks on.

...

After lunch I go out back to check on the progress Jim Conlon has made with his shelter. On pretext I unfurl the gardening hose and water the grass I had raked earlier that morning. I am wearing what my lovely daughter Darnelle calls my wife-beater, along with my homemade sweatshorts and Kenneth Cole brown leather sandals. Sundaywear. I spray around Betty’s rhodendohededrons and daffodils, I guess, until I make my way back to the fence with its lattice of gourd vines and have a look at Jim Conlon’s shelter.

The shelter is complete, and Jim Conlon is nowhere in sight. Always the swift handyman. The shelter stands elongated, domed like a grey turd in the middle of the Conlon backyard. The thorough type, Jim Conlon has even broken down and cleaned away all evidence of the shelter’s cardboard box and Styrofoam packing peanuts. Except for my memory there is no indication of the grey turd having been erected, no evidence that this grey turd hadn’t always been there. The grey turd just is, and tomorrow at 6 p.m. sharp after his post-nine-to-five upper-body workout, followed by a fibrous, twined shit, Jim Conlon will be back outside planting petunias in the three flowerboxes lining his bomb shelter.

But it is Sunday, no time to dwell in melancholy, and to get my mind off Jim Conlon’s shelter I stalk away from the gourd-laced fence and unwind more gardening hose from the whirlyqueue. I go around front of our house to water my wife Betty’s orange groves.

The object of envy of our neighbors young and old, the orange groves are one thing Jim Conlon does not have. At the orange groves I catch the neighborboy Li’l Petey upsetting the dirt between row four of the groves and row five with his green army men and sandy-colored terrorists. I shoot him a quick blast in the backside before he yelps and scurries out of my sights amid the groves. At a crouch, and with the hose trailing behind, I skirt the hedgerows to cut Li’l Petey off at the overpass, but he is too experienced; he’s counterswerved under the stone-arch bridge, and he’s gone. I wade atop the bridge and with the nozzle dripping at my hip watch Li’l Petey in the distance as he darts through the front yards of the Wayneses, and the Crandleses, to finally hurdle a fence and gain the safety of his own yard.

I return to the shade of the groves and stand waiting for any little Li’l Petey to stumble across our lawn looking for a good time. But this Sunday morning there’ll be no more. Nonetheless, I wait until soon my daughter Darnelle will be pulling into the driveway from soccer practice.

Darnelle has demanded that I remain indoors when sporting my Sundaywear, more specifically any combination of my present garments, and to stay away from the watering. She better not spot me. I collect Li'l Petey's fallen armymen and terrorists and place them on the public sidewalk in a heap in front of our house. No-man's-land. I abandon my post and advance inside. For Darnelle's sake I lose the wife-beater and the Kenneth Coles. The sweatshorts can stay. I don a turtleneck and slip on some cross-trainers. Garments that say, *Out for a jog*. On the doorstep I do a few jumping jacks, some deep knee bends, hoping to catch the eye of the pretty wives in my neighborhood who might happen to be gazing out the window. I'm energetic. Without warning I spring into action. Like a bolt of lightning I've leapt from the stoop and down the sidewalk I go, off for some canned goods or whatever else my heart desires.

...

My jog brings me again to the crater at town square. Stepping in place to keep my heart rate up, I regard the spiral path that winds about the crater's circumference. I see now that the pathway is one of those freak wonders of nature—wrought from above in a corkscrew fashion. The bums appear as I'd seen them last, in-situ dirty lumps among the wreckage, themselves wreckage. I want to call to them again, to let it be known that, if they so wish, in me they can find camaraderie. But suddenly there's a rumble in the distance. I look to the skies. Then come the sirens. Rising sounds that suggest entire fire and police departments, scores of ambulances. The wind brings to my ears siren after siren, shrill points popping to life one after another to overtake and then coalesce with the previous on the brisk blue air. On the faces of my fellow patrons in town square I ascertain a general unease. Men stand at attention deer-faced, ready to proceed north south east west to shelter as need be. A newsboy passes; I grab him by the cuff.

—What's happened?

—Seems our neighbors in Maple Oaks next suburb over are out of luck. . . .

—Out of luck?

—The Big One...

—That's it?

—Obliteration.

I release him. He sprints for the ghetto.

"We'll have at the enemy's Maple Oaks equivalent!" a man vows. Others give their oaths. Still more hope, by God. From the crater a bum looks up at me warily, as if to say, *I'm scared.* With a downcast look I can only communicate that *I understand*, *though I can't be of much help*, and besides, a man works his whole life to provide for his... Anyhow, I do have a wad of money in my sneakers, stuffed into my gymsocks. So I jog out of town square and half a block to the nearest big-box store to peruse their bomb shelters. I walk the aisles with a slight apprehension, wary that my family and neighbors

may think I'm mimicking Jim Conlon in this undertaking. Whatever. If anything I am taking advantage of my independence. I make my selection, I direct a stockboy to reach the box on the topmost shelf. No, no, not that one. Yes, that one. To concede that Jim Conlon may have gotten the jump on things is less damaging in the long run than neglecting the time for action, which is now. For a moment I wonder if there is an aphorism for that sentiment. I look the box over. Then I send the stockboy back up his ladder to replace my selection. Thank you, but on second thought I will opt for a nicer model. I spend big.

...

It's a Coleman brand. They make excellent camping stoves, tents, lanterns, flashlights, and the like. I own one of their plastic 250-milliliter French-press coffeemakers, though I use it hardly at all. Our backyard is mostly composed of rolling hills but we've also a nice swale covered in Bahia grass. Here I've set up two floodlamps, just in case, so I can work well into the night if necessary. Once I start a Sunday project my mind's set to it. I've also laid the groundwork upon the grass. Seems I'll need multiple types of screwdriver. Darnelle emerges from the patio sliding door. She descends the patio staircase bearing a tray with fresh lemonade. She hasn't changed from her soccer shorts, her practice jersey, or her soccer socks, which are rolled down below her calves. The girl never sweats.

"Sam," she says, "how's the new project?" Darnelle and I share the joke that her calling me by my first name gets under my skin.

"Coming along." I lean on my shovel and take the lemonade she offers. It is an everyday occurrence, but with the sun shining on her face, she brushes away her hair and I become happy despite myself. Life is good.

I intone fatherly, "I just want you to know"—a solemn nod toward the groundwork of the bomb shelter—"that you might need to use this someday, Darnelle."

She smiles, and with a patronizing hand on my shoulder, "Yes, father." Then her expression brightens even more, and I follow her eyes over my shoulder to see Jim Conlon emerging from his backdoor. He waves, to Darnelle, and begins to water his rose trellises and sunflowers. It occurs to me that his yard is sunnier than mine. Around his head dance plump bumblebees and intricate butterflies, a cloud of pollen floats by.

Was there some portentous thing behind that wave to my daughter? Darnelle giggles, sways, puts a finger to her mouth. She giggles again, sways. "Hee hee." A thought occurs to her. I see the thought in each stage of its germination. She moves forward and sets the lemonade tray down, bending from the waist in a way I can only label objectively as, *sexily*. She places the tray on a section of mortar that I've laid.

Protesting unfairly, and meekly, I tell her she has set the tray on the TV room, or the den. With my slight reprimand she has seen what I have seen, understood what I have understood, and is back to her old self. She blushes,

says goodbye to all, pivots, and hurries off in the direction of the house. I turn to observe Jim Conlon, his grecian stature, hands on hips regarding her retreating soccer-shorted bottom. He's smiling at the latter and at so much more, shaking his head at the silhouette of Darnelle, which just now dwindles on the horizon. He's had a good look-see, and a good laugh.

...

Due to some unforeseen setbacks, it takes me the better part of two days to complete the shelter. I work the rest of Sunday, and then I finish it after a grueling Monday at work, grueling because of its excited-to-get-home nature. But on Tuesday, my excitement does not keep me from stopping at the crater on my walk home from work. Like all men I was eager to talk to other, nonthreatening males about my projects, and I was also concerned for the safety of the bums, with the utmost hope that things for them would turn out right. So, inspired, dynamic, and with resolve I descend the crater's spiral walkway. I'm not happily greeted, I'm not greeted at all, but this does not deter me from deciding upon a confidant. He is short, an ugly bum with a bulbous wino's nose, a derby hat, black-and-white striped shirt, suspenders, penny loafers, silver-dollar cufflinks, a frown, an odd hair protruding from his neck, glaucoma, cataracts, a paper cup, and (oh, what's that smell?) a nugget of chud in his trousers. And finally, and most important, in his pocket there's a vignette of dear-old mom encased in a gold locket, which he reveals to me almost instantly, to preface our conversation. As if he's been waiting for me, the bum tells me about wants, dreams, his intense desires for drugs, alcohol, needs of the flesh! Underneath it all I feel that he is worried about the bombings, and with slight prodding I am able to extract this confidence from him. He opens up. He can sense the bombings are getting more frequent, more devastating, and has noticed that people are starting to take notice.

"I know, I know," I offer, placing a hand on his shoulder. We have a topic in common, and he's provided the perfect segue to share my excitement. First I tell him about the new do-it-yourself shelters. Yeah, I say, it's the new thing. Then I go into detail about my specific project—its strategic location in my yard, tucked into the trough of two hills, its stopping power, comfortability, added amenities—all while making careful distinctions between my shelter and Jim Conlon's, whom I note is my neighbor, and whom we both agree is a bit of a lousy bum. No offense, I add. We share a laugh!

More pleasantries are exchanged, and finally he broaches the subject: money. Do I have any money to spare. I shake my head with a smile, not to refuse him but to express my disappointment. Thinking about money at a time like this. Still, I reach in my pocket and fish for three quarters, no, wait, four quarters, let's make it a dollar, and hand it to him.

Finally it's time to go. I have to finish outfitting my shelter, after all. I stand up, take his hand genuinely, and shake it.

"You know what?" I say thoughtfully, "I like you." The bum weeps,

for I'm the only person who has ever truly understood him. I head up the pathway. I turn and call down with a wave, "Don't forget to look into getting yourself a decent bomb shelter." I wave again, extending my advice to the other bums who look up for the first time.

"That goes for all of you. This one here won't do. So long."

...

On the way home things take a turn for the worse. There are more explosions in the distance. The enemy's planned the bombing to coincide with rush hour, when the terraces and drives of our subdivisions are packed bumper to bumper. Only this time no sirens follow, no screechings of fire trucks and police detail, no ambulances. The people around me are not reassured. Either the authorities in charge have been obliterated or, worse, they've deserted us to head for the hills! Women and men hurry to and fro, holding their hats on tightly. A toddler is left wailing on a street corner. I hold my briefcase above my head, on top of my hat, both to shield from falling ordnance and to keep the briefcase clear of stumbling pedestrians. I push my way through the crowd. The crowd pushes its way through me. Suddenly a man ravenous for blood clutches my lapels. His hat has fallen off his head, his eyes have gone yellow, and I swat him off with a downward striking motion of the briefcase. He sprawls into the gutter. I make it home in the nick of time.

My wife Betty is prepared. She's purchased a stockload of nonperishables. I look sadly upon a can of processed cheese-food, and likewise upon a roll of processed bread-squares to go with it. How long we will have to go without fresh cheese and baguette?

"Don't tell me what's happened now," I say. I slump down on the stool at the kitchen counter. "You'll never believe what I've just been through."

Betty's in the middle of reading off an alphabetical list as Darnelle responds, chipper, a pencil in her ear and another at her teeth.

"Ham, canned," declares Betty.

"Check."

"Ham radio."

"Check."

"Hand lotion. Hand towels. Handi Wipes."

"Check. Check. Check."

"Heinz Genuine Dill Gherkins. Heinz Spears, Kosher Style. Heinz Sweet Salad Cubes."

"Check. Check. And check."

Between checklist items the two women in my life tell me what's happened. Seems our government's high-tailed it for the hills, as I guessed. Seems the rebs have us on the run.

"It's like every man for himself," Darnelle adds, wide-eyed. She places a bundle of toilet paper in my hands, along with some feminine unmentionables.

They load me up with boxes and grocery bags and usher me outside. I make trip after trip from our beautiful home to our beautiful bomb shelter, which the women have painted to look nothing like Jim Conlon's sorry grey turd. Things are looking better already. Meanwhile Darnelle makes a last-minute run to the video store for some DVDs, just in case, as she says, to get us through winter. Twenty years of hauling groceries from the market to the car, then from the car to the kitchen has made me an efficiency master, so I am able to carry Betty's sofa chair and lamp simultaneously, one hundred yards to the shelter. She follows me bearing only her magazine rack.

"Betty," I say, "if you were to hold the rack like this under your arm, and like this here, you'd have room to carry more—" But just then Jim Conlon and his wife emerge from their home. His wife's a five foot eleven Chanel blonde, leggy and young. She's pouting, making her way to the shelter reluctantly but nevertheless in style. High heels, nice tight black skirt. She's holding a humongous handbag, out of which pokes the head of a wide-eyed hairless rat. Jim Conlon is taking great pains not to upset the wife. He's speaking gingerly about the need to make for the shelter in a prompt and orderly fashion. But no, no, it should be noted that at the same time he's definitely not trying to hurry anyone. He looks up and gives my wife Betty a smile.

"Seems like *everyone's* doing the shelter thing," Betty offers, trying and failing miserably to match the wife's style. Jim Conlon shrugs, yeah, but what can you do.

He gets the wife buttoned up in the shelter, hairless rat and all. My wife, too, buttons up in our shelter. She now has her sofa chair, lamp, magazines. On my way out I prop open the shelter hatch with, to Betty's protest, a rolled up magazine, thinking ahead so's to save me the trouble of opening and closing the hatch each trip. I look up to see Jim Conlon crouching before his hatch door; with a jar of pennies he has just done the same. From him a sideways glance, still crouched. Then he stands. Beside our respective hatches Jim Conlon and I wait. The sky is orange-pink, likewise the sun hangs like a cross-cut grapefruit, nervous and throbbing. A few spires of black smoke rising now beyond the tree line. Chill winds bring to us the sounds of terror from surrounding communities. Car horns and screams cut the air, gunfire, the occasional explosion. The rumblings of a million frantics, some in exodus, yet more reduced to all forms of barbarism. I've always regretted, but this time especially and for different reasons, that from our backyard we've no view of the town square.

My rival and I exchange an important look. We detect in that grapefruit sun a new dawn. We intuit an urgency to work quickly against its clock, and perhaps in our competitiveness we can help each other excel. We rush to our respective houses. But I've more distance to cover than he; for the first time I curse my more spacious yard! Inside I gather all things to my body like a magnet. I emerge. He emerges. We can barely see over our loads. We

traverse our yards, jogging, running, slowing again, running now, in world-class balancing acts that go noticed only by us. We unload in our shelters, and reemerge. We deliver only the barest essentials. We're moving at incredible speeds and efficiency, challenging each other to be the very best. The two of us are the closest we've ever been. On the third trip we're pals, all animosities forgotten. By the fifth trip he's my brother.

On my sixth trip from the house Darnelle arrives, thank God, from the video store with the DVDs and assorted snacks. She begins to cite her video selections, notes my urgency, and picks up my stride. Me with the air-conditioner, cord trailing, she with a plastic bag of videos and a twist of licorice in her mouth. "*National Treasure*," she's saying, "and *Natch Treas 2*." Just fifty yards to the shelter, we're midway there. Crossing a dell, I set foot in a knotty patch and nearly fumble the air-conditioner. Darnelle lends a hand—she rights it in my clutches, our pace unbroken. We accelerate to a trot. Double-time. Jim Conlon pushes open the screen door of his house, several Expressionist paintings underarm, and makes his way through his fine rose espaliers at a brisk jog.

At this point all time stops. Three minutes earlier, and at a height of five thousand two hundred and eighty feet, an ordnance bay hatch door opened with a rusty groan, and with a similar groan of metal pincers a Fat Man deployed from its moorings. I'm wobbling again with the AC, I trip over a root, I go down. Surprisingly the impact I make with the ground is cataclysmic, the earth explodes. My body is launched a foot or more. A heartbeat passes, and then the earth rains down on me, the air-conditioner is smashed before my face by a heavy something or other. I feel Darnelle beside me, she grasps my hand. We dare to look up.

Jim Conlon's bomb shelter has been annihilated; a piece of grey turd hangs smoldering atop my fence. I can hear nothing. Jim Conlon sits in awe on the pathway between the rose espaliers, not twenty yards from his former shelter, his hat beside him in the dirt. He has dropped the paintings, one of which is scorched at a corner. The rose bushes have caught fire, as have the gourd vines that wind along our fence, only a section of which remains, having been breached by unidentifiable rubble (limbs? bone fragments?) that now litters my yard. I help Darnelle to her feet. I dust off my hat. We sprint to our shelter, never mind the air-conditioner. But she pulls me, drags me toward Jim Conlon instead, motioning, yelling. Okay, okay, it's the right thing to do, I think, perhaps I even say it aloud. But first I insist that Darnelle enter our shelter. She agrees. Then I brave the burning section of fence, a burning espalier, sidestepping fireballs of every size on the ground. I scoop up Jim Conlon in my arms, throw him over my shoulder. In a state of melancholy he's dead weight. He's not helping any, probably thinking of his wife, the hairless rat, all the effort he put into that shelter. I turn. I scoop up the several Expressionist paintings and his hat, and we make our way to my bomb shelter.

...

For the better part of a day I was the hero, although I was disappointed that no one had witnessed any of it. You couldn't count Jim Conlon as a witness, the state he was in. I received kisses from my wife, and from Darnelle. My clothes were dirty and scorched and I was handed a fresh outfit by someone, I can't remember whom, and was left to nurse my minor scrapes. The women moved on to the body of Jim Conlon, derobed him, soaked his bruises and burns in a bath of warm water, dried him with a towel each, then rubbed him down with olive oil. Not twenty-four hours had passed and my wife, with sidelong glances at Jim Conlon's comatose body upon the kitchen table, was already hinting at crucial steps to be taken that would ensure the survival of the human species. At this Darnelle's ears would perk up, although at that point she was too shy to voice her support in the matter.

I pounded my fist on the counter. "This is not nuclear war, dear, it's conventional."

"Yes, but—"

I redirected my contempt at Darnelle, who lounged dreamily beside Jim Conlon. "For God's sake," I said, "put some clothes on that man!" She obliged and wrapped Jim Conlon's glistening body in my bathrobe. My wife coughed and returned to the pages of a magazine.

...

For now Jim Conlon remains committed to his coma. Seven weeks have passed with hardly a minute's rest between explosions. The ground shakes with each one. We haven't ventured outside, haven't even taken a look out the hatch for fear of what we might see. The women have begun to make the smallest suggestions of moving Jim Conlon's body from atop the kitchen table to the more comfortable resting place of our bed. Seems it's in the best interest for his bedsores. They're working very subtly to bend my will, but I won't have it.

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About the Author

Michael Trudeau is an editor and writer from Saint Paul, Minnesota. His writing has appeared in The Smart Set and Northwind Magazine and is forthcoming in Going Down Swinging and For When the Veil Drops, an anthology from West Pigeon Press.

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Half a Century Later at a Mid-Earth Pub

by Tom Sheehan

After 670 miles of a pretty cross country haul, he saw the meeting-place pub sitting brown and ugly like a hovel at the side of the road. Greg Mulrooney braced himself for comrades, the long stretch between get-togethers, wondering what the hard stuff would do to him this time.

Archie'd be in there, red in the face, after his fifth book, his third wife, his second hospital stay, counting his visits, keeping the tab at his elbow, paying it with no fanfare at all, sometimes embarrassed by his own quick acceptance of it, owing somebody, always owing somebody in this crazy life. Greg saw him again on the ridgeline, forever on the ridgeline it seemed, his pal Archie, squad leader Archie, drinking buddy Archie, history and nostalgia-plagued Archie, black against the morning sun, staggering, falling backwards, his weapon emptying itself at the coming tide, his curses revolving over and over as he rolled down the hill, helmet loose and skittering on edge, canteen bouncing, weapon finally dragged useless and empty into the earth. "Greg, don't let them fuckin' bastards get me! Fuckin' hear me, Greg? Don't let them get me!"

Greg had thrown the red panel on the ground when the first wing-swept Grumman came diving on the hill, dropping the napalm in an end-over-end tumble like a field goal try, an agonizing slow roll to its arc, waiting to see if it hit on this side or the other side of the hill. Even before the flames blew up the incendiary cloud, before the heat passed searingly over their heads, Archie had screamed again, not about the heat and fire, but about the small army of Chinese gathered on the other side, the lead charge then perched on the crest of the hill: "Don't let them little fucks get me, Greg."

Every day of his life, from that moment on, from the burst of the napalm, from the whine and roar of the next Grumman diving down on them like some clumsy bird diving on a seashore, from the repetition of small arms

fire popping a Fourth of July morning, Greg had heard Archie's voice. It was part of his continual terror, the wakeful dream, the sudden silence in pre-dawn darkness: What would have happened if he hadn't leaped to get Archie, hadn't brought him back to the bunker, hadn't hauled him inside just as the whole hill exploded under cannon fire, salvo after salvo after salvo? Two days under earth they were, four men who found a supply of air come tunneling under a small ledge, keeping them alive.

For two days they could hear Chinese spoken but feet away from them, it too coming with the air supply under the ledge. The napalm hit had cleared the peak of the hill, so they had immediate oxygen and enough of it coming through that small aperture. They had survived the close napalm and the creeping barrage and fusillade of their own artillery raking the length of the hill. A few timbers of the bunker roof held the Chinese People's Army at little more than arm's length. Under the weakest looking timber he had wedged his rifle. They had slept fitfully yet not daring to move, keeping their legs in place, their bowels inert, their voices down, whispers as bare as breath. When hunger came in its push, like the snake it was, as if it had burrowed down to get at them, they talked about favorite meals.

It came on him again, the breakfast they created for the Last Supper, lounging in the back of his head; not the way he remembered it, but the way it was: It was raining, it was 1951, it was Korea, and they lay barricaded behind dirt, loam, rock, shale, speckled hardpan, spent shrapnel, an unknown blood brown as a berry stain on a bleached wood. Stale powder smell was a laboratory smell circulating in the small hole of the mountain, the saucer of war left over, battle's cup spilleth, the meat and meal of death taking up the air. They were wet, they were cold, they were hungry. Now and then, muffled by all of earth, Chinese came spoken as the enemy passed over or paused above the retreat. Once vaguely he had thought of Sub Gum Harkew, quickly forgot Chinatown, brought rifles back, the probe of bayonets in Chinese hands, the thrust a search would bring, invasive, calculated, steel surgeons at work, dread doctors at awe. They waited, they hungered, they whispered, and silence, like fungus in a root cellar, like onions in a poem he could vaguely remember, grew around them, sopping, thickening, becoming moldy and wet and ever damp, crypt stuff if there ever was, mad man's mausoleum. It was a piece of an old barn he had known, probably still struggling to sit up on its haunches in Middleboro, Massachusetts, horse leftovers, mule-stuff, leather traces, hay as old as Methuselah, fallen dust, mushrooms taking over corners.

Diaz' beard then was a mold he could only feel. He had trouble feeling his own feet, legs locked in place, now and then thighs convulsed. Come outhouse ripe was his breath and he cursed without using words, magnificent curses that blew out from his soul. McCaffery, on his left, two days of blood on his forehead as hard as plaster cast, mumbled about steak, onions, round breads his mother made atop her stove where the blue haze climbed on mountains.

McCaffery brought Kentucky across the parallel, pulled it into that dim and dark retreat, as if it had seceded finally from the Union; Kentucky has odors that live forever; he whispered of turkey taken down, browned wild rice, hickory up in smoke, ham air curling all the way down a valley's run where the boar thought it was loose forever. Darkness did food proper. It dissipated the edge of death, carried off wounds, lingered in the wet silence as if someone'd spilled next door's *olla podrida*. The pot is the great custodian for nosy things after blood, after pain, after resurrection of hope, after palate memory, after taste finds one breathing air foul as rotting flesh. On the second day of mold, damp, other liqueurs, Chinese spoken atop rarely now, but distinctly, Diaz said they ought to speak of urgent meals to make their mouths water, to salivate.

McCaffery's Kentucky came succulent, wet, leaves taking on mist, the mountains blue as far as you could see. He saw deep-set stains working his mother's apron all to pieces as she delivered the turkey into meals that might last a week, the rice of them, a red jelly, steam-twisted green vegetables, bread thick as an anvil and justly memorable.

Diaz, though, went Mexican haywire; enchiladas wild with chili, an almost Cajun burn in his own mouth, the desert burning under a saucer sun. In the middle of Diaz' meal Greg had remembered a goat once over buckets of coals in New Hampshire, on a farm cut into the side of another mountain, poets reading into and out of a night of loving and the disappearance of the whole goat.

Now Diaz' face refused to come back to him, but mold of his beard. He knew Diaz' eyes were not blue, but could not pick out their color. His mouth, his mouth so close to him, was ripening yet. Back over the meals the stench came, live as an ache. Chinese lingered again, jabbered, passed on the way history eases itself forward, slipped away like rain or pain or a forgotten cloud when your back is turned. . .

McCaffery, in the bowels of the Earth, said he cried because of sausages.

Greg himself whispered of Vermont morning mountain peaks sticking up through an ocean of cloth-clean clouds, dew-damp gracing every surface, as if lacquer's sheen had been put in place to wait out the sun, and his brother Jim, early bird, dawn's pot-rustler, spiller of coffee, drawing together pairs of eggs, near-burnt toast, noisy Canadian bacon slabs echoing from mountain top to mountain top.

He told Diaz and McCaffery and Archie how his brother cooked, how he floats forever in the holiest waters of Lake Erie drumming up meals for him. McCaffery cried again, bled again, became desert hot, cooled, said his back hurt in a new setting. Wept. The mountain rocked. And Kentucky rocked. If those sounds were in the Sonora Desert would they have been heard? What was tamale? Chili? What was that dank smell, that small explosion, old wet barns, mildew in the mows, eggs gone over the edge, moist

blankets holding night in their twill, those brothers, those comrades, his brother, that wetness, drivel of four bodies as if they had been canned forever. Sardines cooled and wet in the war.

Silence. Wet silence. Hush.

Boots. Beyond the barricade, above, a voice, an uncursed, non-Asiatic voice, "Jeezzus, Sarge!"

It was sweet as yams, maple syrup, the catch that's caught up in Kentucky rice. Brought Mexico across the border. Made Vermont suddenly valid. Made morning's meal, wet miracle, come in the latter part of that long ago day, that impermanent burial.

He put the gearshift in park, shut off the ignition, gathered himself. . .there was one car missing.

###

About the Author

Tom Sheehan served in the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951-52, and graduated from Boston College after military service in 1956. His short story collections are *Epic Cures* and *Brief Cases, Short Spans*, from Press 53; and *From the Quickening*, and *A Collection of Friends* from Pocol Press. He has 18 Pushcart nominations, appeared in *Dzanc Best of the Web 2009*, and has 295 stories on *Rope and Wire Magazine.* He has appeared in 5 issues of *Rosebud Magazine* and 8 issues of *Ocean Magazine*. His novels include *Vigilantes East, An Accountable Death, Death of a Phantom Receiver* (an NFL mystery), and a manuscript, *Murder from the Forum (*an NHL mystery), is currently being considered by a publisher. On the cover of the June 2012 issue of Nazar Look from Ukraine's Crimea, Sheehan is in his 85th year and keeps busy writing, with two eBooks in the last year, *Korean Echoes* and *The Westering* from Milspeak Publishers, with the latter book nominated by the publisher for a National Book Award.

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Homeland Security

by Brenda Kezar

"Word must be getting out. Only half a dozen crossers the last two days." The man in the baseball cap dragged a meaty hand across the scarred surface of the bar and dusted peanut shells onto the floor.

"Don't that just figure?" The man in the cowboy hat slammed his palm against the bar. "The government's dumped truckloads of money into it, all for no good, but now that we've turned it into a moneymaker for ourselves. . ." He shook his head. "I guess we're victims of our own success."

He drained his beer, sat the empty on the counter, and drummed his fingers against it thoughtfully. In the silence, the worn-out ceiling fan squeaked its dying complaints and barely stirred the tentacles of blue smoke drifting overhead. "Well hell," he said, tipping back his battered cowboy hat. "Let's see if we can get a few more guys to sign up and extend the patrols."

His companion lifted his baseball cap and ran a shaky hand through his limp, sweaty locks.

"You really think that's a good idea? How long before the liberals catch wind and get their panties in a bunch?"

"It won't matter. Not once they see the numbers." He caught the bartender's eye and gestured for another beer. "Everyone's worried about safety these days. Soccer moms don't want al-Qaeda sneaking across the border and dropping a plane on little Johnny's Cub Scout meeting. You'd be surprised what they'll put up with to feel secure."

The bartender set a fresh drink in front of him and smiled. "I know *I* feel safer already," he said.

...

The unmarked moving truck sat on the side of the dusty red road, its white sides rippling with heat waves. The driver leaned against the open cargo door, a shotgun resting against his shoulder, and argued with someone inside.

"But I'm Mexican," the man in the cargo hold said.

"Yeah, right," the driver said. "Without your turban, how am I

supposed to know? You *might* be an Ay-rab." He leaned over and spat a long stream of tobacco juice into the red dust, and it seemed to sizzle as it melted into the dirt.

"Let me go. Please. I promise I won't cross again." Tears tracked down the captive's dusty face.

The driver narrowed his eyes. "You speak mighty fine English. I bet you learned it at one of them terrorist schools."

A plain white van rattled up beside them, throwing a cloud of red dust. "What do you got for me, Randy?" the van driver asked.

"Two. The rest are women and kids. I'll have to drive them over to the border patrol office, let them deal with them."

The van driver lowered his voice.

"You sure that's a good idea? Some of those terrorist groups use women and children, knowing we won't hurt 'em." He nodded his head in the direction of the truck. "How do we know they aren't *that kind* of women and children?"

Randy rolled his tobacco plug from one side to the other.

"We don't, buddy. But we can't stoop to their level. We've got to turn the women and children over, at least for now." He stepped back and spit another stream of juice onto the road. "So. . . you ready?"

The van driver nodded. Together, they threw open the back doors of the van, revealing benches along both sides of the cargo area and heavy metal rings welded to the floor. A sturdy metal grid separated the driver's area from the cargo compartment.

They walked back to the moving truck. "Hoo-whee," The van driver said. "What a sorry looking bunch."

Seven wide-eyed women, four crying children, and two men sat in the back of the truck.

"You, and you," Randy gestured at the two men. "Come on out."

The two captives hesitated and looked at each other.

"Come on now, boys." Randy lowered the shotgun. "Don't make me shoot you and spoil all our fun."

The two men shuffled out, the chains on their hands and feet rattling thunderously in the confines of the truck. The children inside threw their hands over their ears and cried.

The drivers each took a captive by the elbow, helped them out of the truck, and led them to the back of the van.

"Get in," the van driver said to his captive.

The shackled man paused, uncertain how to maneuver with the short chain holding his ankles together.

"Oh, for cripes sake," the van driver barked. "You know how to crash a plane into a building but you can't figure out how to get into a van? Set your ass on the floor and then swing your legs up and around."

The shackled man did as he was told. The second captive followed his

example. “Watch my back,” the van driver told Randy. He crawled into the cargo area and padlocked their shackles to the rings in the floor. He wiped the sweat from his eyes, gave the chains one last tug for good measure, and hopped out of the van. He slammed the doors shut and nodded to Randy.

“You bringing the wife on Saturday?”

“Naw. Janey’s mom is coming in for a visit and she’s taking her shopping. They’re going to be gone the whole weekend.”

The van driver grinned. “Well, that’s not so bad, I guess. If you’re mother-in-law’s gotta come for a visit, it’s better if the wife can keep her out of the house.

“Yeah, but Janey’s pretty pissed. She was looking forward to the games.”

“Tell her not to worry. We’re increasing the patrols. The games aren’t going to end anytime soon.”

...

Carlos couldn’t see beyond the high iron gate in front of him, but he could hear the ominous roar of a crowd beyond it. His handler buzzed around him, making last minute adjustments to the costume Carlos wore. The tunic of rough material—painted with palm trees, camels, and domed mosques—made him itch. The oversize, cartoonish turban they pinned on his head made sweat stream into his eyes. In spite of the discomfort, he knew it was pointless to resist. He gingerly touched the swollen lip he’d earned earlier in the day. He tried to ignore the handler and focus on preparing himself for whatever waited on the far side of the gate.

“There you go,” the handler said, straightening up. “You’re ready to go, Ahab.”

“What’s going on? I don’t understand. . .”

The handler smiled menacingly.

“We’re just doing our part to protect our country from terrorists, taking care of our borders.”

Carlos’s face twisted, his eyes welling with tears of rage and desperation.

“I told you, I’m not a terrorist—"

“Yeah, yeah, I know—you’re a Mexican citizen, blah, blah, blah.” He grinned and grabbed the gate handle. “Well Ahab, if you really are a Mexican, you’re going to love this. I know how you people love your cockfights.” He swung the gate open and shoved Carlos through it.

The other side of the gate opened into a small arena, like the kind used for small-town rodeos. This arena, though, was newly built: the high, wood paneled walls still wept sap in places. The stands were full of people who had paid twenty dollars a seat**.** They leapt to their feet and cheered at the sight of Carlos. The cheers turned into a chant:

“USA. . . USA. . . USA.”

Across the ring, another dark-haired, dark-skinned man stumbled

through a gate. Carlos's handlers shouted at him, trying to be heard over the crowd.

"The rules are simple, Ahab. Kill or be killed. Last Ay-rab standing lives to fight another day."

Carlos turned and met the handler's eyes.

"Kill him?"

The handler nodded and smiled.

"Sure. How else are we going to make you terrorists an endangered species?" He pulled a pistol from his hip and pointed it at Carlos. With his other hand he held out a long sword. "Take this."

"You can't do this. It's not right."

"Sure we can. Nobody cares what we do with you people, as long as we're keeping America safe." He paused and waited for Carlos to take the sword. When Carlos didn't, the handler shook it at him. "You better take this Ahab, or else it's going to be a real short fight."

Motion in the stands caught Carlos's attention. A Sheriff stepped to the front of the stands and leaned on the rail. Carlos smiled with relief and took a step toward the stands.

The handler's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Not so fast, Ahab."

Carlos glanced at the handler, then back to the Sheriff. "Please. Help me. These people are loco."

The sheriff studied Carlos a moment before shouting down to the handler, "Throw me a bone here. You've seen them both—who do I put my c-note on?"

Carlos shook his head.

"Please, sir," he tried again. "Help me."

The Sheriff looked at Carlos, his mouth twisted in disgust.

"Shut up, baby-killer. I wasn't talking to you."

The handler chuckled.

"Well, I wouldn't advise betting on this one. He's a loser if I ever saw one. Somewhere a terrorist trainer is dying of embarrassment."

The handler retreated behind the gate and slammed it shut. The sheriff stared at Carlos a moment more.

"You better get ready to meet your Allah, son," he said, and turned to take his seat in the crowd.

Carlos scanned the crowd, looking for someone—anyone—who could help, but all eyes were filled with eager bloodlust. He turned to his opponent. The other man, like Carlos, stayed close to his door. He, too, stared at the crowd in amazement.

Behind him, Carlos's handler yelled, "Get out there and fight, Ahab!"

Carlos glanced back at the crowd. Spittle flew; fists shook; eyes bulged in scarlet faces. Every one of them looked like they wanted to jump the fence and kill Carlos with their own bare hands. They had become of one

mind, one purpos—a roaring, angry crowd-beast hungry for blood.

A shot rang out, and Carlos jumped. He spun around as the man on the far side of the ring crumpled to the ground. Carlos dropped his sword and ran to the other man's side.

"Are you okay?" he asked, dropping to his knees. The man cowered in the fetal position.

The other handler swaggered out from behind the gate, the pistol in his hand pointed at the man on the ground. Carlos jumped to his feet and took a few steps back. The handler ignored Carlos and kept his attention focused on his own fighter.

"Get up, you lazy mule." The toothpick between his lips bobbed like a diving board**.** He kicked at the man on the ground, but it only made the man curl tighter into a ball. "Get up and fight!"

The cowering man uncurled and reached out, palms up. "Por Favor. Parada. Por Favor."

"Quit your babbling Mohammad!" The handler kicked him again.

Carlos trembled, his fists clenching and unclenching.

"Habla inglés?" he yelled to the other fighter.

The cowering man finally noticed him.

"No. No habla inglés."

"He doesn't speak English," Carlos yelled.

The handler moved his toothpick to the other side of his mouth.

"I know. He speaks jabbering camel-jockey talk."

"Spanish. He's speaking Spanish."

The handler shrugged.

"So he's bilingual. Wetback and camel-jockey." He kicked him again. "Ain't that right, Mohammed." And again. "Allah Akbar, right? You ain't gonna get no virgins by cowering in the dust like a cur."

Carlos took a few tentative steps toward them.

"Leave him alone."

The handler shrugged.

"Fine. You win." He raised his pistol and fired. Carlos backpedaled, tripped over his own feet, and fell hard. The cowering man's feet drummed in the dirt, kicking up small puffs of red dust, then he shuddered and lay still.

The handler took a step forward and pushed the dead man with his foot. The man rolled limply onto his back. Satisfied, the handler turned his attention to Carlos.

"Consider yourself lucky." He gestured toward the dead man. "You're next if you don't stand up and fight. I'm not cruel—I believe in giving a man a fighting chance. I can either shoot you now, or you can take your chances with another fighter. What's it going to be?" He rolled his toothpick side to side and waited for Carlos's answer.

Carlos looked at the dead man staring emptily up at the sky. Blood trickled from the corner of the dead man's mouth, and red sand clung to his

glassy eyes. Carlos looked at the crowd-beast, on its feet, holding its breath as it eagerly waited to see what would happen next.

Carlos stood and dusted himself off. Very quietly, too quietly, he thought, for anyone to hear, he whispered, “I’ll fight.”

The crowd-beast went wild.

###

About the Author

Brenda Kezar is a horror and fantasy writer living in North Dakota. Her stories have appeared in *Penumbra, SNM Horror Magazine, Inclinations, Down in the Cellar, Thema, Emerald Tales, Zombidays: Festivities of the Flesheaters*, and elsewhere. Her website is: http://www.BrendaKezar.com.

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In the Blink of An Eye

by Nick Johnson

Up until now the gears of history had grinded at such a slow pace that our perception of it was like a puzzle, the constantly changing pieces creating an eternally changing picture inhabited and shaped by generations, but progress made it possible for change to arrive in the form of a flash just one billionth of a second long with a blinding light and the pain of flesh-searing

fire that burned away the world I knew like it was covered in lighter fluid.

For us there were no blue skies. Daytime was just when the sun was shining bright enough to penetrate through the arid black clouds that had consumed the sky and mingled with the distant glow of the burning horizon, painting the atmosphere with blood. For an untold number of hours, maybe as long as a day, it was my only sight. The constant screams became white noise; as I spiraled into death my perceptions continued to dim, until there was nothing left but fear and pain. Every hour the world became dimmer, and I was viewing everything through a dark tunnel that was narrowing to a close. I was disconnected from my body, and movement was almost impossible without overwhelming pain.

I was not the only one there. The number of dying was countless, and it was ever growing. They announced that we were to be “prioritized.” Some of us could be saved, but most would die, and false hope was no longer a luxury that could be afforded. These new circumstances instantly brought an end to the moral quandary of the mercy killing, and overnight murder became a service provided to those beyond saving. The bombs' fire did more than vaporize our cities—it destroyed all our preconceived notions about life and death. When I could, I would listen for the doctors and soldiers whose task it was to choose life or death for all of us at their mercy. I hadn’t moved a muscle since the blast. Most of me had either gone numb or felt as if it was still burning. I knew there was a bullet for me.

A black gas mask suddenly moved into my field of vision, blocking the sky. Its giant, insectlike eyes met mine, and we stared at each other for a second, but I wasn’t sure if he knew I could see him.

“What about this one?” his voice filtered through a respirator addressing someone I couldn’t see.

“Fuck this guy must have burns on about 80% of his body. He’s definitely a category three, take him back with the others,” he replied casually. And just like that the verdict was in, and a man I didn’t know and whose face I’d never seen had condemned me to death.

My body was incapable of reaction, but there was something in the corner of my mind, a last vestige of will that was crying out, driving an inner and inexpressible panic to well up inside me as I found myself facing the last few moments of my life. It was then I could feel myself being raised off the ground as they lifted me from both ends. The black gas mask hung in my face, and although he was looking at me he didn’t acknowledge me. As my body rattled in their shaky grip a pain like fire ran in waves through my flesh. No noise escaped my lips, but inside I was screaming loud enough to drown out every other noise that came out of the chaos around me. My head fell to the side and I could see the rows of bodies on the ground. Some of them moved, some of them pleaded, and some of them prayed, but most were still.

They were all teetering on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the slightest breeze to push them into the abyss. They all contributed to the layer of blood

that covered the ground that had turned black with dust. Some of them had been so mangled and wore flesh so charred that I forgot I was looking at something that used to resemble a human. The gas mask moved away from my face as I felt myself set down on a broken concrete surface. It was like I never moved. I was still lying on my back, staring up at the same dead sky that covered a choked sun. I heard the metallic slide of a clip being jammed into a pistol. I was sure I was paralyzed, but I could still feel my body clench. The air froze in my chest, and I could feel my heart stop as I waited for the gunshot. The painful anticipation was quickly put to an end with a bang that pierced my ear drums, followed by another just a second later. My instinct to cover my ears made me feel like I was being pushed from inside myself, but my body couldn't move with it and rested like a wall against its strain.

The gunshots continued one after another. Occasionally the silence in between would be broken with crying, begging, or praying, but they were always quickly silenced by the next shot or the one right after that. Fear welled up in my throat, until I was choking on it. Every shot brought them closer, and every shot added to the suffocating terror. Then suddenly it stopped, and the air was suddenly released from my lungs as a wave of powerful relief washed over me, grateful to inhabit my burnt, painful shell just a few minutes longer.

"What is it?" one asked the other. I heard heavy coughing.

"Shit I gotta…..I just gotta take a break a second." The voice, no longer filtered through the gas mask, sounded completely human. I could hear the heavy strain as he struggled to finish the sentence like he was choking on the words.

"You ok?" the other one responded, by the sound of it still wearing his mask.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," he responded.

The other one walked over and patted him on the back. "Go have a cigarette. I'll finish up here."

"Are you sure?" the soldier asked shakily.

"Yeah go on," he answered.

I heard brisk footsteps, then after a moment I was looking back up into the monstrous black eyes of the gas mask. He held his black .45 into the air and cocked it. He took a deep breath and pointed the gun directly at my head. My eyes were instantly drawn into the barrel. My thoughts became screams that were growing louder and louder, but I couldn't hear the words. I could feel my eyelids stretch back, and my body felt like it was burning as I waited for him to pull the trigger. But instead he took the gun away from my head.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"Please please," I could finally hear myself.

"Wow I'm really surprised you can talk," he said. I ignored the comment and carried on my whispered pleading. "I'm sorry bro," he

apologized calmly “but I have to shoot you, it’s my job. There’s no way we can help you.” He paused for a second “Besides you must be in a lot of pain anyway.”

Stinging tears welled in my eyes. It was the first time I was able to cry since the blast. I felt the warm tears running down my face, and my mouth went dry as I struggled to beg for my life.

“Please don’t—I…” was all I could muster before he interrupted me angrily.

“You know what, we all got problems. My whole family’s dead, and I still had to come to work today. How fucked up is that?” He stared at me, his head perfectly still for a moment, and sighed.

“Shit I’m sorry about blowin up on you, it’s not your fault. Hey, I mean look at the Brightside, this probably got you outta work right?” He chuckled somewhat awkwardly “Ha, you know I bet there’s some kid out there just happy this got him out of a math test.” He let out a labored laugh that tapered off until he was completely quiet. He stayed that way a moment and started talking again.

“You know I’ve done this so many times now. . .”

I lay quiet and motionless, stunned by the turn of events, as he turned my execution into some kind of macabre therapy session and decided to really let it all out. He sat down next to my head.

“You know what I get for doing this?” he asked rhetorically. “An extra bottle of water and pack of cigarettes every week.” He was quiet for a second. “Shit, man, I actually don’t know who’s the fucked one here. At least you don’t have to worry about what you’re going to do now. He paused. “That thought's really been scaring the shit outta me. Shit, but you probably don’t wanna hear about my problems.”

The cocking of his pistol was the conclusion of his great speech. He bent down and held the barrel just inches from my head. I was always told I would see my life flash before my eyes right before death, a moment to contemplate a lifetime. Lying in a row of bodies under a blackened sky that was bringing forth the slow death of nuclear winter, I realized the truth was that none of it had mattered. My fate had been sealed by forces far beyond me long ago, and no matter what I would have done differently the outcome would have been more or less the same.

A moment may not seem like much, but it was in that time I finally realized death was the return to normalcy. The vast majority of time has and will pass without me. My life had only been a brief interruption of oblivion, and now it was time to go back. I saw the flash from the muzzle, and before I could hear anything there was suddenly nothing.

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About the Author

After completely losing interest in school, Nick decided to pick up

writing again and had his first two stories published over the winter. Most of his writings are bleak and are built on the premise that people are capable of anything.

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I Think I Won

by David J. Williams

There was a mistake.

The mistake lasted for about a nanosecond.

A nanosecond is the amount of time it takes for light to travel one foot. Another good way to express it is one billionth of one second.

The mistake was an adventure of man.

The mistake was a measure of the capabilities of man.

It killed 2.89 billion men and women and children, and in total 6.5 trillion metazoan creatures.

Not bad for one billionth of one second.

It took place when a computer that did what it was told was told the wrong thing, by way of a shorted override wire approximately one foot in length. That computer then ordered cylinders of titanium and steel and fissionable material to rise, graze the edge of space, and erase whatever part of

the world they landed on. More cylinders shortly came back from the other direction, and these, too, did a splendid job of erasing things. The unerased looked at the heavens and asked them why it was happening, a very subjective thing to do, since the sky was too busy splitting atoms of its own to notice a few artificial reactions on such a little blue ball. Still, it cured man of believing himself to be the center of the universe, an actor that the oblivious nothingness kept an especially proud eye on. It couldn't see him in his holes.

Several months after the mistake, the tattered remainder of man began to emerge from the fortunate holes he had found. A few people wondered dully what had happened, a few more died of brand new diseases, many more died of traditional diseases, and most of them did what they could, which was to form into packs and loot what there was to be looted. There wasn't much.

At such times of cultural flux, legends are apt to spring up, but too few people expected future generations to be around to remember any legends. No one sang the glories of great cities, because no one expected their children to believe those black, glassy bowls had ever held anything. No one collected stories with morals, such as the one about the man in the ruins of Ankara, Turkey, who called himself the second coming of Christ, and who was promptly crucified. Men forgot other stories, like the way American pilots obliterated San Francisco trying to get at some Soviet submarines in the bay, or how the Canadian forests burned for a year and a day, stories that probably didn't have any morals.

Only hazy memories of various millennia of various civilizations were able to survive. A Chinese atmospheric research station was undamaged in its box canyon in northeast Sinkiang Province. The scientists wandered away when they ran out of provisions and things to do. Two-hundred miles away, under bunkers on the shores of Lake Balklash, part of the Russian high command sustained itself on calcium tablets and blind fish. A few miles from Colorado Springs, Colorado, the North American Air Defense Command huddled in the roots of Cheyenne Mountain, eating dried rations and an occasional corpse from a zoo at the top of the mountain.

About that mountain.

It was expected to survive a direct hit if it had to.

It wasn't particularly large, as mountains go, but had two advantages to recommend it: First, it had a granite crown and an easy-to-excavate sandstone base; and second, it was near taller mountains that made it hard for anyone to program a missile to come in at an accurate enough angle to hit it.

It housed the most complicated communications network ever devised.

It had two concrete doors at the main entrance, each weighing seventy tons.

And it had no commander when the war started, even though it was considered essential to have someone in clear control at all times.

Maj. Gen. Samuel Bradford Maxwell was visiting his grandchildren

in Millinocket, Maine, when one of his computers began having hallucinations of nonexistent radar blips. No one at the installation had corrected the orders it gave, because only General Maxwell or his designate outranked that particular computer.

General Maxwell couldn't get to Cheyenne Mountain until six weeks after the last missile was spent. By that time, he found himself one of two-thousand refugees keeping vigil at the doors, waiting for them to open. In fact, several hundred men had already claimed to be Samuel B. Maxwell, and most of them had presented impeccable credentials attesting to that claim. General Maxwell knew better than to try to present his own credentials to the guards watching from inside, who were getting edgy, so he began to organize the multitudes to take them elsewhere. By the time winter had tinned out half the people at the doors, they began to grow receptive to his suggestions, as he led them to Estes Park, a deserted resort behind the no longer salubrious Rocky Mountain Front Range.

At Estes Park, whose scenery was still impressive, the survivors of the door vigil had time to think back--and to grow bitter--at the way things had changed. They constructed a short-wave station, declaring to an uncaring and uninterested world that the United States was still a going concern, that Estes Park was the provisional capitol, and that America would continue to fight until the war was won. These truculent broadcasts were monitored in Olorgesailie, Kenya, by a Masai shepherd who didn't speak English or any other Indo-European language. Similar broadcasts from Taldy-Kurgan, Siberia, left him equally baffled, and he still dialed fruitlessly for the weather reports out of Nairobi. Nothing came of these broadcasts, for many years, anyway.

Meanwhile, the widowed general remarried, sired a son at the age of seventy-one, found honor in his own country, and died. Many of those who had shared the experience at the mountain followed suit; life spans were short. Soon, the only people who had been at the doors were newly grown children, who didn't remember just where the mountain was.

Twelve years after the last member of the crowd at the mountain had died, a well-organized and hardened group of soldiers attacked Estes Park. The panicked and unprepared inhabitants oiled old hunting weapons, drove the attackers south, and began to worry about Cheyenne Mountain again, sure that it held wise documents telling them how to repel any threat. A party of searchers was sent to Mount Elbert in hopes that it contained the fabled caves, but to no avail.

In time, most of the impressive mountains in the vicinity were investigated, but Cheyenne Mountain, being little more than a foothill, was ignored as being too small to hold what was expected of The Mountain. In fact, several skirmishes were fought in plain sight of the mountain between remnants of the American and Russian armies. Neither side knew the nature of the tall hill just west of the battlefield they struggled for, and neither side

cared. It was in those skirmishes that the tired and badly equipped handful of Russian soldiers was finally routed and chased into the mountains, there to engage in sporadic and ineffective raids on hunters who had no ideas that America had ever existed.

But s descendant of Samuel Maxwell did finally find his way into the mountain. He was named Charles Shakespeare Maxwell, one of two great-grandsons of the general. The eldest, Abraham Lincoln Maxwell, wrote and supervised the propaganda still beamed out of the capitol from time to time. C. Shakey Maxwell carried on what was regarded as a tradition for Maxwells in Estes Park; commander of the puny armies whipped together when they seemed necessary.

At the age of thirty-one, C. Shakey Maxwell led his entire army of twelve men south to reinvestigate a place called Pike's Peak for the caves. Two of the soldiers died of pleurisy before they got there, another was killed in a rockfall, and the remaining members were caught in an ambush shortly after the expedition began heading back home. Only C. Shakey Maxwell survived it, but apparently none of the enemy survived at all, the last one shot by Maxwell while attempting to climb to higher ground. Maxwell buried the bodies of his men and the bodies of the attackers without feeling one way or another. He walked north with a numbed feeling.

The war was over at last. The predicted 20-minute war had been fought to conclusion. An onus had been thrust away. The last surviving soldier began to frame the statement he would bring to the stilled, expectant crowds at home.

"I think I won. I am the last soldier. I survive. I survive. I think I won."

And Maxwell might have died but for that statement and an accident. He followed a bypath he came upon, and he simultaneously began to starve.

A rabbit ran across the path. Well, not so much a rabbit. But a lagomorph at any rate. Maxwell killed it, following its indicated direction. The place was swarming with rabbits.

Maxwell came upon a road at the foot of a hill he had not paid any notice to before. He followed the road out of a disinterested curiosity for a mile or so, and what did he see? A tunnel? Yes! A tunnel. He ran into the tunnel and found at the end, yellowed and pitted, two doors.

The doors! They had revealed themselves after the war was over at last, surely an omen of some kind, a victory over chance, or at least a sign that the universe wasn't the empty void man had decided it was, but an orderly entity fond of practical jokes. Maxwell laughed, exuberantly tried to force the crack open, tried to beat through the concrete, tried to find a hole weathered through it.

C. Shakey Maxwell was taken aback, when, at length, the doors swung ponderously back and an English-speaking voice told him to come in.

"Thank you," said C. Shakey Maxwell.

The cavern was the closest thing to a holy shrine Maxwell knew about.

"Is this the NORAD?" he said, using a secret, magic word that he and only he could know.

"Yes, It was," came the voice.

The cavern was surprisingly small and cold and dark, something of a disappointment. Spider webs lay draped over bank upon bank of decaying computers, one of which held the rusting remnant of a shorted override switch. The spiders were pink and active and vegetarian, having hung up their toxins under a lack of food and 8,000 roentgen units per square foot in regions of the plain below. They still spun webs they didn't need, however, and the webs were still a wonder to anyone who had a sense of wonder. That did not include the people already in the cave.

Maxwell dimly noted three people standing out of the setting sun, leaning back against the wall by the entrance: two men and a middle-aged woman. After he blinked the reflected glare from his eyes, he saw that the men wore blue armpatches on their frayed coats, a sign that they were Americans or traded with Americans, and that the middle-aged woman was not middle-aged at all, but a girl of about eighteen.

"What's your country?" asked a voice. Maxwell didn't know what "country" meant, but his soldier's instincts made the correct reply for him:

"I'm an America," he replied. He didn't know what an "America" was, except that he was one. He also knew that he was not a Russia, and that the possessor of the voice would kill him if he was.

"Then sing the national anthem," demanded the voice.

Maxwell screeched dry-mouthed through a tune vaguely like the song played over the radio station at home, feeling foolish to be singing for his life at the threshold of the caves. There was muffled conversation.

"Guess you are," said the man who had kept an ancient rifle trained at Maxwell as he lowered the barrel, "What's your name?"

"Maxwell."

"Radio says Maxwell's dead."

"That was my father. But listen--" he said as he remembered the news he wanted to tell someone--"--It's all over. I just got a couple Russias. I think I won."

The rifle barrel came back up and the three began to whisper to themselves again, wondering what Maxwell meant. After all, their hundred-year folk memory had always been filled with exhortations to persevere against Russias, a war that had been since the beginning of time. They had no conception that it could end. Maxwell strained to hear a few words from the subdued colloquy, warily cocking his rifle in case they didn't believe he was who he said he was. They no doubt knew the talent of the Russias for trickery and subversion, and were debating as to whether he was a spy or not. They decided in Maxwell's favor and the rifle was lower--one more time.

"I guess we oughta celebrate if it's over," suggested the younger of the two men.

"Yeah, I suppose so," said the other.

Maxwell was escorted over to a bunk beside a control panel and asked to explain his story. Maxwell told about the attack and how he was the only survivor from either side, and how he guessed he won. The younger man, more loquacious than the other, broke into a wide smile and told a few lies about his own exploits. The girl brought in a crumbly green plant and some pipes after a while, and all four of them began to sing some songs other than the national anthem. An evening breeze swirled into the installation, the first welcome fresh air it had held in a century. The party walked confidently out onto the road and tried to dance, but no one knew how. Maxwell and the girl sat down while the men went inside to get some blankets.

"Were you born in the mountain?" she asked after a time.

"No. I didn't know if it really existed until this afternoon."

"We were ready to shoot you when you said you were named Maxwell," she said. "Even a Maxwell wouldn't find the cave like that:

"Then how did you find it?"

"We found the zoo at the top."

Maxwell was interested to hear that the zoo was still there. When his great-grandfather had tried to get inside through one of the vents, his first wife had looked at the gaunt, spavined creatures left to die in the zoo and cried,

"Ooh. Those poor animals!" She was one of the first to die when winter came.

"You weren't born in Estes Park, were you," said Maxwell. It was more of a statement than a question.

"No, I was born way out over there," she said, broadly indicated the Front Range of the Rockies.

"In the open?" Maxwell was amazed that anyone not born far away from the plains could be born undeformed. Well formed, in fact.

"I don't remember if it was in the open or not," she said, somehow offended at the question.

While they had been talking, they discovered, Maxwell and the girl had begun holding each other's hands and staring meaningfully in each other's eyes. Maxwell retrieved his hand and blushed copiously, trying to hide his uneasiness by remarking as to how it was a nice night for so late in the fall. The sun was beginning to set rapidly. She smiled wisely and stood up to walk back toward home, knowing Maxwell would casually try to follow her. She stopped about fifty yards from the entrance of the caves as Maxwell came sheepishly up to where she stood. He made a clumsy attempt to stroke her hair, and she leaned her head onto his shoulder. They stood looking at the beauty of the indifferent universe.

There was a faint pop. The girl fell, grasping at her throat, while Maxwell felt something rip into the muscle of his shoulder.

"Russias!" shouted Maxwell to the two men as they came out of the doors. One of them fell immediately, a dark spot growing on the front of his jacket. The other zigzagged toward Maxwell carrying his rifle before him. He was hit several feet from where Maxwell lay, skidding sibilantly on the gravel road, throwing his weapon clear, out into the brush alongside. Maxwell crawled into the cover, picked up the rifle, and ran for the top like all the Russias in the world were after him.

And all the Russias in the world *were* after him. All the Russias in the world consisted of Sergeant Jiri Dracek, a wiry man with a great capability for survival and a dangling, nearly useless left arm, which Maxwell had given him two days before. Dracek began to chase the only man besides himself and two shrinking enclaves of people in separate mountain range who knew about nations, or ideology, or that things had ever been any different with the world than they were now.

Dracek shoved his last clip into his carbine and checked up the slope; there was no place more likely than any other for a sniper to hide. The dusty scar of the road ran around to the south and up, dotted here and there with chunks of eroded macadam, crossed in places by dry gullies and old drainage beds. Somber shells of dead pine trees stood above the scrub brush, their brittle branches reaching out like warning hands, a reminder of a fire that had swept up the mountain a century before. An auxilliary path ran parallel to the main road for a hundred yards or so, then ambled into it. A dry rill followed the road up to two large, barren rocks standing like sentinels over the green cover and grinning crumbly defiance at the plants trying to take seed on them. Two shallow layers of chips carpeted their feet, and beyond them a mass of faulted stone jutted abruptly out of the hillside. The best path would be through the mass of stone, reasoned Dracek; Maxwell would probably pick his way through and make a break for the old zoo, and either make a stand from there or attempt a sniper's nest from above.

That's when he made his mistake.

Dracek saw Maxwell duck behind one of the two rock faces. He would go behind the second rock, using it for cover and ascending until he could get a clear shot.

The failing light made it hard to pick his way upward, and he had to pause often to let his throbbing arm rest a bit. Soon, however, a full moon was rising in the east, radiating a bright orange light among the black shadows cast by the rockscape. Dracek sank down and peeked out occasionally to scan for movement.

There it was--a dark shape edging along a ledge toward the concrete foundation of the zoo. Maxwell had obviously decided to make his move from the zoo. If Maxwell made it there, Dracek feared he could probably never catch him. Too many hiding places. He stood up suddenly, slammed his carbine onto a shoulder-high notch and prepared to take aim.

Dracek's silhouette appeared against the ridge, and Maxwell flattened

against the ground, dodging a shot. When he heard the sound of reloading, he vaulted over the foundation and hit the path circling the animal enclosures at a run. A whole bunch more of those rabbit things scattered in all directions.

Another bullet whizzed over his head. Damn, that Russia never gave up.

He fired a few more rounds back toward the sentinel rocks and spied the map of the zoo showing the Mountaineer Summit and advertising the bear house.

They exchanged volleys all the way to the top, each seeing the enemy clearly in the moonlight. Maxwell climbed up into the gable of the bear house. He watched as Dracek approached stealthily, but just then Dracek hit a patch of scree that sent him sprawling. He made an easy target.

At length, Maxwell realized he was the only one firing. Dracek lay unmoving below. He climbed down from the roof and poked at the body with his toe. Satisfied, he turned to head back home, when he felt a sharp pain rake across the back of his neck. He pitched screaming to the ground.

Before the last America was torn to tiny shreds, he coldly performed a pre-post mortem analysis.

There was a mistake.

While quick, this mistake took longer than a nanosecond.

It happened when Maxwell made an error in judgment in choosing to enter the zoo.

The rabbit things overunning the zoo had attracted a pack of mutant shurracks, vicious scavengers and rulers of the mountain.

Maxwell uttered a soldier's last imprecation against an uncaring universe.

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Editor's Note: For a look at how evolution might occur if humans were not on earth, see *After Man: A Zoology of the Future*, by Dougal Dixon, Eddison Sadd Editions, 1998, London.

About the Author

We reserved a spot in the "war" issue for a deceased writer, David J. Williams. The J. stood for Joseph. Joe always wanted to write science fiction and left behind some drafts of his stories. "I Think I Won," is an excellent story on the aftermath of war. It holds up surprisingly well to the test of time, considering that it was written in the early 1970s. One can divine hints of Ellison and King peeking out through the prose. Joe had a big vocabulary and a satirical descriptive technique, and he applied them skillfully in this story set at Cheyenne Mountain, the NORAD center near Colorado Springs, Colorado. We're honored to preserve one of Joe's stories in the digital universe.

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